MANHUNT

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APRIL, 1958

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"YOU'RE DEAD!"

A Novelette

by

Helen Nielsen

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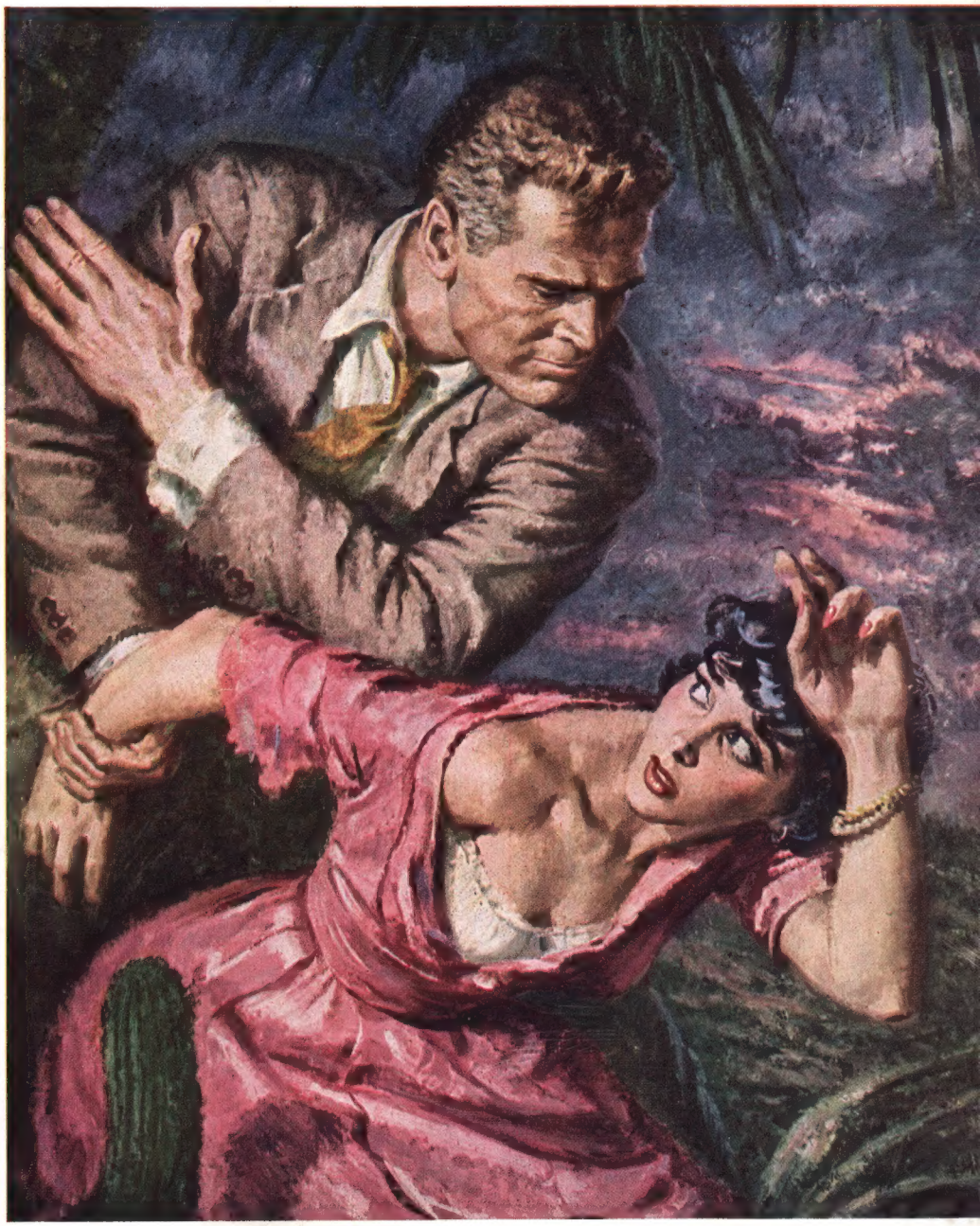

MANHUNT

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Pop went right to work when the car hit me. He sure knew how to turn a dishonest buck. . . .

don't twist my arm

by JACK RITCHIE

POP TOLD ME to roll up the sleeve of my shirt. "You can see for yourself," he said. "The kid's arm is all bent. He can't use it hardly at all now and it'll get worse year by year."

Mr. Ward leaned forward to look and the eyes in his heavy face showed nothing.

Pop waved a hand. "We'll hit them for all we can get. I don't care who pays. Either Peterson or his insurance company."

Mr. Ward rolled the cigar in his mouth a couple of times and then reached for his pen.

"Henry Peterson is the guy's name," Pop said. He watched Mr. Ward write. "Senator Henry Peterson."

Mr. Ward and Pop looked at each other for about ten seconds, and then Mr. Ward got a little smile on his face. "All right," he said. "Go on."

"My kid was crossing the street when he was run down by the senator's car," Pop said. "A big job in the five thousand dollar class."

I cleared my throat. "I was playing ball in the street."

Mr. Ward's eyes went over me without finding anything interesting. "Shut up, kid," he said.

"I was sitting on the stoop and I saw the whole thing," Pop said. "I picked up Freddie and took him to a doctor."

Mr. Ward played with his pen. "How come you didn't take the kid to a hospital? That's what usually happens in cases like that."

Pop shrugged. "The doc was nearer."

Mr. Ward smiled and rubbed his chin. "You were excited. That's natural. A father's first con-

cern is for his kid and he's got the right to lose his head. What did Peterson do?"

Pop crossed his legs. "He came along."

I remembered the look on Senator Peterson's face when he saw how dirty Dr. Miller's office was.

Mr. Ward looked at my arm again. "When did all this happen?"

Pop shifted in his chair. "About two years ago."

Mr. Ward chuckled very softly.

Pop got a little red. "I figured the arm would turn out all right. But the kid kept yammering about it day and night. I finally took him to another doctor."

Mr. Ward puffed his cigar and waited.

Pop ran his tongue over his lips. "They'll have to break Freddie's arm and put it back together again. Even then it might never grow any longer than it is now."

Pop shook his head and looked down at his hands. "The kid's future is ruined. And look at him. He's lost maybe twenty pounds. He can't get no sleep nights because of the hurt."

Mr. Ward studied me. "How old is he?"

"Fifteen," Pop said. "He's always been a runt."

Pop took a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and lit it. "I signed a paper with Peterson's insurance company and got five hundred dollars. I needed the money. But that don't mean a thing now. Not when the arm turned out this way."

Mr. Ward looked at the ceiling. "Why not sue the doctor?"

"You can't get blood out of a stone," Pop said.

Mr. Ward chuckled again and looked Pop over. "When we get together with Peterson, it might be a good idea if you shaved. Wear a necktie too."

We left Mr. Ward's office and walked down three flights of stairs to the street.

When we got near Danny's Bar, Pop slowed down and rattled the change in his pocket. He licked his lips, but I knew he wasn't going in there. Danny charges thirty-five cents for a drink. At O'Brien's you get the same stuff for twenty.

At Thirty-eighth, we crossed the street so that we wouldn't have to go past Ricco's. Pop doesn't go near there ever since he had that fight with Louie Milo who hangs out there.

Pop went into O'Brien's and I followed him.

Mr. O'Brien waited until Pop put money on the bar before he poured a drink. Then he looked at me. "Get the hell out of here, kid."

Pop yawned. "You heard him, Freddie."

"I'm not doing anything," I said.

Mr. O'Brien leaned over the bar. "Move before I put a boot in your rump."

Pop downed his drink and put some more change on the bar.

I looked at him for a few seconds and then I left and started walking home.

My arm hurt pretty bad. It gets that way when it's damp.

I went upstairs to the place where Pop and I live. There was half a bottle of olives in the refrigerator and some butter. There was a tomato too, but it was rotten. I found some bread and ate a little before I went outside again.

Turk and Pete and Gino were hanging around Harrigan's Grocery and they were wearing their Red Hawk jackets.

Once I nearly got one. I had eight dollars, but that was gone now.

They didn't pay no attention when I came up and leaned against the building next to them.

Pete got out his cigarettes and passed the pack to Turk and Gino. I put out my hand, but Gino gave the pack back to Pete.

Pete lit up for all three of them.

"I once read how that got started," I said. "You know, that business about three on a match being unlucky. It was in the First World War and if you kept a match lit long enough for three lights, a German sniper was liable to get a bead on you."

They didn't look at me and so I guess they didn't care about the story.

I waited a little while and then said. "I saw a couple of the Goldens today. I went through their territory."

Gino looked at me. "You beat their heads together? Is that it, Freddie?"

I changed my mind about what I was going to say. I shrugged. "I didn't want to start nothing there. I would of been mobbed."

"I'm surprised at you, Freddie," Turk said. "You're the brave type. It runs in the family."

Gino coughed on some cigarette smoke. "I thought I'd bust a gut when I seen little Louie chase Freddie's old man out of Ricco's. He's sure got speed when he's scared. Ain't that right, Freddie?"

I looked at the Poulos girls passing across the street and tried to quick think of something to say about the way they swung their hips. But I couldn't think of nothing.

Red Kelly's chromed-up Chevvy pulled to the curb and Pete, Turk and Gino got inside. I thought there was room for one more, but Gino shut the door after him.

They took off and I watched them turn the corner.

Pop came home around ten o'clock with Willie Bragan. They had a pint with them and they began talking about the job they were going to do on Saturday night. I asked if I could be lookout, but Pop told me to shut up.

When they settled everything and finished the pint, Bragan went home.

Before Pop went to bed, he looked under the kitchen clock. He always does that ever since he found the eight dollars I set aside for the jacket.

I fixed myself some butter bread and went to the window and looked down. It was getting quiet

outside and the traffic was thinning.

Pop woke at twelve. When he was through, I got the mop and cleaned up. Then I went to bed.

Senator Peterson was at the meeting and Mr. Jenkins, the lawyer from his insurance company, and Mr. Ward.

Pop looked mad. "You seen the X-rays. The kid's crippled for life."

Mr. Jenkins shuffled some of the papers on his lap. "This Dr. Miller who set the boy's arm. He lost his license several months ago for unethical practices."

"How the hell was I supposed to know what kind of a doctor he was?" Pop said. "The sign on the door said 'Doctor.' Am I supposed to drop the kid on the floor and check with the Medical Society first?"

Mr. Jenkins' voice was dry. "How did you happen to select him?"

Mr. Ward cleared his throat. "As my client explained, Dr. Miller was the nearest aid available."

Senator Peterson had grayish hair and he was about Pop's age. But his skin was clear.

He studied Pop. "It would seem that this Dr. Miller is the man to sue."

Mr. Ward smiled. "Dr. Miller disappeared shortly after losing his license. We've made an extensive search, but we've been unable to find a trace of him."

Pop pointed to Senator Peterson. "You're the one who's responsible. It was your car that hit the boy."

Mr. Jenkins sighed. "I fail to see that you have any case at all. At the time of the accident you absolutely refused to have the boy taken to a hospital. You refused to allow our doctors to examine him. In addition, you signed an agreement waiving all future claims, for which you received five hundred dollars. Under the circumstances, neither my company nor Senator Peterson can be held responsible for the mistakes of this Dr. Miller."

It was quiet for a while and then Mr. Ward took the cigar out of his mouth. "Perhaps we don't have an iron-bound case, from the legal point of view." He looked at Senator Peterson. "I believe you are running for the Senate again? Do you suppose the publicity might be harmful?"

Mr. Jenkins and Senator Peterson looked at each other.

"I see," Mr. Jenkins said. He put his papers back in his brief case and got to his feet. "Are you coming, Senator?"

Senator Peterson didn't look at him.

Mr. Jenkins smiled tightly. "At any rate, my company is not running for the Senate."

He went to the door and left.

But Senator Peterson stayed.

It was evening and I didn't feel like going to the movies. I got some candy bars instead and went back home. I went up the fire escape and sat down outside our window.

I heard voices inside the kitchen and shifted over a little so I could take a peek inside.

Dr. Miller and Pop were drinking from a bottle on the table. I could see the label and it was a real expensive brand.

Dr. Miller filled his glass. "The kid around?"

Pop lit a cigar. "No. I gave him a buck and told him to take in a movie." He slapped the table. "That bastard Ward took forty percent. He even said we were lucky he didn't take more."

Dr. Miller was bald and he wore glasses that made his eyes twice as big as anybody else's. He shrugged. "It's robbery, but there's nothing we can do about it. We still got twelve thousand out of the deal and we split that even."

I threw away the candy bar. I could feel sweat begin all over my body.

Pop's face was dark red. "I get a lousy six thousand. That's all I get for listening to that kid whimper for two years."

I shook my head. That was all wrong too. I didn't whimper.

Dr. Miller took a cigar out of the box on the table. "We had to wait at least a couple of years. I told you that in the beginning. We had to give that arm time to get real bad."

Pop pounded the table. "By rights, I'm entitled to more than a fifty-fifty split. I'm the one who got the idea for the whole thing the second I seen what a high price car hit Freddie."

Dr. Miller laughed. "Hell, all the kid got out of it was a trip to the movies. Be satisfied that he don't know what you did to him. He might get the notion to cut your throat one of these nights."

I gripped the cool railing of the fire escape hard with my good hand. There was a big knife in the drawer of the kitchen table. I'd wait until Dr. Miller was gone and Pop was asleep. Then I'd do it.

Dr. Miller stayed for another hour before he left. I settled down on the fire escape, waiting and watching Pop drink. I figured that he'd probably have enough by eleven o'clock.

Then I remembered that this was Saturday and he and Bragan were supposed to do a job.

I wondered if Pop could get out of it. He wouldn't want to take any chances with small stuff, now that he had the six thousand. But he couldn't tell Bragan that he had the money. You don't do something like that with Bragan if you want to keep it.

Willie Bragan came at ten and Pop looked surprised. I guess he forgot that it was Saturday.

Bragan looked at the bottle of whiskey and then at the cigars. "I thought you was broke."

Pop licked his lips. "A guy paid me back fifty he owed."

Bragan grunted. "Since when you been lending

money?"

Pop laughed nervous. "An old friend."

Bragan wasn't buying that, but he shrugged. "We'll talk about it later. Let's get going. I got the truck downstairs in front."

Pop's voice had a whine in it. "Let's put it off, Willie. I'm not feeling so good tonight."

Bragan smiled a little and took a handful of cigars out of the box.

Pop didn't like that, but Bragan is a big man and you don't complain.

"Honest, Willie," Pop said. "I've been feeling rotten all day."

Bragan smelled one of the cigars. "Take a couple aspirins."

I watched them get in the truck down below and then I went down the fire escape.

It was cool in the streets and I began walking. Pop wouldn't be back for three or four hours and I couldn't sit still that long. Not with what was going on in my head.

I don't know how long it was, but after a while I was in a long empty street and there were mostly warehouses on both sides. I was a little surprised to be there. But now that I was, I sat down in a doorway and watched the warehouse near the end of the block.

A cop turned the corner far down the street. He walked slow, shining his flashlight into the doorways.

And then he stopped in front of the warehouse I was watching. He seemed to be listening and then he took the gun out of his holster. He moved on his toes to the doors of the warehouse and he listened for another half a minute.

I wondered if I should do something, but then I remembered what I'd heard on the fire escape and I kept quiet.

The cop pulled open one of the sliding doors fast and jumped inside. The light poured out and I could see the cop's shadow stretching all the way across the road.

I waited a while and then I got up and walked toward the open door.

The cop had his back to me and he was standing just inside the door with his gun.

Pop and Bragan were facing him with their hands over their heads. Pop's face was white and Bragan was scowling. They were standing next to Bragan's big truck and it was about half loaded with automobile parts and new tires from the warehouse.

Bragan's eyes shifted in my direction and he saw me.

The cop noticed that and he jumped to one side like a scared cat. His gun swung back and forth between us, "Get over there with the rest of them."

I shook my head. "I don't have anything to do with this. I was just passing by."

The cop had a hard laugh. "At two o'clock in the morning, kid? Like hell." His gun jerked again. "Get your hands up."

I put up my right arm. "I can't lift the other one."

He looked at my short arm and his lips twisted. "So you got a cripple for the lookout work. Maybe that's all he's good for. He wouldn't be much help wrestling tires into your truck."

I looked at the cop and I saw that he had the kind of yellow brown eyes that Pop has.

Pop swallowed hard. "Look, we can fix this up."

The crop grinned. "That's right. I'm just a poor cop. I don't earn too much."

I could tell from his voice that he was just playing, but Pop kept trying anyhow.

"Five hundred bucks," Pop said. "I can raise five hundred."

The cop kept grinning. "Keep going."

Pop was sweating. He had a record and it wasn't going to be easy for him if he got in front of a judge. "A thousand," he said. "I can get it to you in a day."

Bragan was looking at Pop now too and I guess he was wondering whether Pop was faking it or whether he really had the money. Maybe he was thinking about the whiskey and the cigars.

The cop's eyes flicked around the big room and he saw the wall phone.

Pop's voice got high. "Two thousand," he said. "Three."

For a second the cop looked interested. But then I guess he took another look at Pop and figured that he couldn't have that kind of money.

The cop couldn't keep his eyes on everything. Not on Bragan, and Pop, and me, and the wall phone. I guess he decided I was the least important.

He took his eyes away from me for a few seconds when he started edging for the phone.

Pop looked at me now and he was asking for help.

There wasn't much time and I had to make up my mind. I hesitated for a second and then I stooped down and grabbed a tire iron leaning against the wall. I swung with all my might and the iron bit deep into the cop's skull.

Bragan came out of the shock first. He went to the door and pulled it shut. Then he knelt down beside the cop. After a while, he looked up. "He's dead."

I nodded and tossed the tire iron aside.

Pop was shaking. "The kid done it. We got no part of this."

Bragan got to his feet. "We're in it as deep as the kid is. We're in the big league now."

He picked up the tire iron and wiped my fingerprints off with his handkerchief. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

He went to the big doors and slid them open.

I stood to one side and watched them get into

the truck. Pop put his head out of the cab. "Damn it," he yelled to me. "Get in."

I stood there for a few seconds, uncertain. I was sick with what he was. I didn't know if I wanted to stick with him any more—I didn't even know why I'd stuck with him this long . . .

"For God's sake, kid, get in," he said again. And I saw his frightened eyes dart over in the direction of Bragan.

Pop would have trouble with Bragan about the six thousand. *He might need me.* And as I thought it, I realized why I'd stuck with him, because no one else on earth had ever needed or wanted me for any reason, and, jeez, how I needed to be needed . . .

"All right," I said. "All right, Pop, I'm coming."

Ready Remedy

In Syracuse, N. Y., Thomas Glovemore, 52, insisted on taking a sack containing almost a hundred bottles of medicine when he was sentenced to jail for panhandling. Asked why he had so much medicine, Glovemore replied, "That's easy. Sometimes I don't feel good—like right now."

Safety First

A 17-year-old Ravenna, O., youth being held in jail complained to a reporter that he had no way to light his cigarets. "They won't let me have matches or a lighter here," he explained. Police accused the youth of setting 35 fires including a $90,000 church blaze.

Insult to Injury

A thief in Cheshire, Conn., awakened Joseph Fazzone in the wee hours with a telephone call to tell him his automobile had been stolen. Investigating, Fazzone found the thief had also taken two evergreen trees from his front lawn.

House of Doors

In Romford, England, Philip Tomkins, 53, received a month's jail sentence for stealing 428 door handles from the hardware store where he was employed. Tomkins said he stole the handles because he thought they would come in handy in his new home he was planning to build.

BY POPULAR DEMAND

The June issue of MANHUNT, on sale March 25, will be in the handy POCKET-SIZE. Don't miss it. Be sure to ask your newsdealer to reserve your copy today.

by
JACK Q. LYNN

He said he liked me, but that didn't fool me for a minute. He just liked the fact that I'd stashed away . . .

FIFTEEN GRAND

When they drove into the station about four o'clock I couldn't believe my eyes. The rod was a blue, top-down convert, the driver was a stimulating blonde, and the cop sitting beside her was a no-good slob.

His face split, and he sang out cheerily, "Hey-ho, Lawrence, fill it up."

The name hit me hard. Everybody called me Duke—everybody but this cop. But walking out to the number two island that afternoon, I smiled right back at him and took a quick surface inventory. It had been a long time since I'd seen him. He hadn't changed much. He still had pointed ears, tiny eyes almost lost in the fleshy folds of his face, and a rosebud mouth that always made me think he had just sucked a lemon. He looked sixty; he probably was around forty-five.

"Hi ya, Mr. Dill," I said cautiously.

"*Mr.* Dill!" He laughed and popped a hand on the blonde's thigh. "Hey, Mavis, did you hear that? *Mr.* Dill, he says. How 'bout that?"

"How 'bout what, Harry?" Her voice was husky,

heavy with animal magnetism. Harry Dill was a fat ape, but she was something else. Deep-chested, long-legged, maybe twenty-six, she hit me right where I lived the hardest. And I got the idea she knew it as she looked straight at me. "How 'bout what, Harry?" she repeated.

"The kid's got manners."

"He looks like a real gentleman," she said.

Harry Dill laughed again. "What he looks like and what he is—that's two different things. Lawrence, here, has been in stir." He looked at me. His eyes were hard. "You know who went to bat for you while you were in stir, Lawrence? You know who fixed it so you didn't have to stay there forever. Yeah, I see you do. You want to know why? Because I like you, boy. And when I like a guy I do all I can for him." He bounced in the seat, looking very pleased with himself. "Now," he said, "how 'bout giving us that gas so we can get the hell out of here."

"Sure thing, Mr. Dill."

The convert drank ten gallons, and the blonde gave me a ten dollar bill with a red smile. "You keep the change, Lawrence."

I stared down at her. "My name is Duke."

"I know," she said, giving me a slow wink.

I couldn't help it. My eyes flicked to Harry Dill. But it was okay. He was behind her, grinning at me. He couldn't possibly have seen the wink. He said, "Ain't she a charge, boy? Well, see you 'round. Hey-ho, Mavis, let's go."

I stood rooted in the drive, watching the convert roll smoothly into the line of traffic. And that night, after my relief showed up at eight o'clock, I went straight back to our cold-water flat and sat around talking to my mom.

She said, "You're making too much out of it, son. Harry Dill can't touch you. Not any more."

"He can as long as I'm on parole."

"Not if you stay out of trouble."

"I ain't gonna get in trouble, mom. Not any more."

"Then Harry Dill can't hurt you."

"Sure," I said, standing. I bent over her and kissed her forehead. "Sure, I guess you're right, mom." I went into my bedroom and undressed in the dark.

What was it Harry Dill had said? *"I like you, boy. And when I like a guy I do all I can for him."*

That was bull. What he liked was the green I had stashed.

The suburban bank had been easy. I'd knocked it off alone with just one hitch. The handkerchief had slipped off my face and a teller had a good look at me. But I'd made a clean break, driven over to McCome, a little town about forty-five miles out of the city, and buried the fifteen grand in a tin box. Then I'd come back to the city. About a week later, Harry Dill had come around to my place with a penciled sketch in his hand. Some copper artist had done a good job. The mug books had helped. It was routine then: the courtroom, some wild stories about terrorizing from witnesses I wasn't even sure had been in the bank, and sentenced.

But I'd refused to talk about the fifteen grand. It had never been found. And now I was sure Harry Dill thought I would lead him to it.

The next afternoon the blue convert rolled into the station again, but this time the blonde Mavis was alone. She gave me a bright smile as I came out of the station. "Hi," she said.

She was wearing a bright green sweater, white bullfighter pants and white moccasins on bare feet. My palms felt wet. I wiped them on my pants and shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "Where's your friend?" I said cautiously.

"You mean Harry?" she said, her eyebrows shooting up. "I don't know. Who cares?"

"I care."

She measured me with her eyes for a long time. Then: "You don't like Harry, do you?"

Careful, I thought. "Oh, he's okay," I said, attempting indifference.

She laughed softly. "He's a one hundred percent bum."

I looked at her sharply, and the surprise must have been on my face because she laughed again. "Really, he is."

What the hell is going on?, I thought. But I didn't push it. "You want some gas?"

"No."

I sucked in a deep breath then and looked at her blankly. "Okay, what do you want?"

"When are you finished here?"

"You mean tonight?"

"Certainly, I mean tonight."

"Eight o'clock if my relief shows. Why?"

"I'll pick you up. Here."

I measured her. "Why?"

"Do I have to have a reason?" she said lightly.

"Yes."

She seemed to think it over. She closed white teeth on her lower lip and stared into space for a moment, and then she looked me straight in the eye. "You've been in prison. Well . . . let's say that makes you interesting—to me."

I leaned into the convert. "The hell it does." And then I said, "Look, Mavis, let's get a couple of things straight. Harry Dill hates my guts. And I hate his guts. But I'm walking the straight and narrow. I don't know what you want and I don't want to know. I only know one thing: Harry Dill doesn't get the chance he wants!"

"What chance?" she said softly.

I stared at her. She was frowning up at me. Could it be she didn't know? "Why don't you get the hell out of here?" I snapped.

"What chance?" she prodded.

"Beat it."

She stared at me for a long time, and then she shrugged and started the convert motor. "Okay, Duke. But in case you have a change of heart, I'm at the Langston Apartments, corner of 13th and Broad, 7-A. I'll be there until—say, nine o'clock tonight."

I was tempted, but I shook my head. And she gave me a hard smile. "Are you afraid of me?"

I laughed harshly. "I don't trust you, baby."

"You mean because of Harry Dill?"

"Because of Harry Dill."

She sucked in a deep breath then and wrinkled her eyes. "Look, Harry Dill is old enough to be my father—" she slid part way across the seat and covered one of my hands with hers—"and I'll be damned if—"

I stood up straight, jerking my hand away from her. She laughed softly. She was getting through to me, and she knew it. I kicked it around in my mind. It didn't look good because it had a Harry Dill odor. Still . . .

"Nine o'clock?" she said. And then she slid back under the wheel and drove the convert out of the station.

If I said I didn't have her on my mind the remainder of that afternoon and right up to nine o'clock that night I'd be a liar. She was all I could think about. But she frightened me—in a way. Any other time, under any other conditions, I think I would have kicked over five hundred smacks for her. But under the circumstances—I mean, with Harry Dill being her buddy-buddy—no, thanks, pal. She wasn't for me.

But at nine o'clock, straight up, I was scattering knuckles across a door marked 7-A in the Langston Apartments.

Mavis opened the door, smiled at me, and pulled me into a large, plush room. I stood there, looking around, taking in everything. I could see into the bedroom to my right. The door was open and there was a shaded light in there. But I didn't spend much time on the bedroom because Mavis was standing in front of me in a black robe and black slippers. The robe was closed all the way to her throat and had gold on the shoulders, but it was easy to tell that all that was under the robe was Mavis. I'd never seen so much woman in all of my life.

When I got my eyes up to her face, she was smiling. She took a step toward me without saying anything. But that's when all of the common sense I had came crashing down on me. What the hell was I doing in this trap with Harry Dill's girl friend standing practically naked and just inches in front of me. What if Harry walked in the door. . . .

"Where are you going?" Surprise sharpened her voice.

I looked at her over my shoulder. I had one hand on the door knob. "It's been nice, honey."

"Goddamnit, Duke—"

"If it was just you, honey, you couldn't blast me out of here."

"It *is* just me."

"Look, you think I'm dumb? You think I don't know why Harry—"

The knock on the door was loud and I jumped almost a foot into the room. On the other side of the door, Harry Dill's voice boomed, "Open up, doll. It's me."

I whirled around. Mavis grabbed me. "Quick!" she said, pushing me toward the bedroom. "In there. There's a gun in the dressing table. Use it if you have to!"

I was in the bedroom and she had the door shut almost before I knew what was happening. And then I heard Harry Dill in the front room. I went over to the window. Nothing but air between me and the cement seven decks down. I went to the dressing table. There was a rod, okay. A .45 with a full magazine. I hefted it in my hand, thinking. Why had Mavis told me to use it? It was almost as if she might want Harry Dill dead.

Shrugging, I put the thought out of my head and the gun back in the table. Then I eased across the room and put my ear against the door. I could hear the sound of voices, but I couldn't make out the words. Then suddenly Harry Dill's voice came to me very clear: "Look, doll, I've got things planned."

"But not for tonight, Harry," Mavis said.

"Sure, tonight."

"Not with me."

"Why not with you?"

"Because . . . well, damnit, Harry, it's just that—" She lowered her voice and all I could hear was a whispering sound.

After a few seconds, Harry cursed. Then: "Well, how 'bout a kiss, at least?"

"Sure, Harry."

There was silence, and then I heard him say, "Damn!" and the sound of a door opening.

"Tomorrow, Harry?" Mavis said. "I should be all right tomorrow."

"Sure, doll, sure. Tomorrow."

I heard the front door close then and I jerked open the door in front of me. Mavis was standing with her hands on the knob behind her and her shoulders pressed against the wood. There was a smile on her red mouth. She stood that way a long time, and then she pushed away from the door and came toward me.

"Now, Duke, are you satisfied? I got rid of him."

"So?"

"So this," she said, launching herself against me. I tried to push her away, but it was no good. I'd been in stir too long, and she got to me too fast. Her mouth against mine was experienced and the full length of her body pressing against me brought alive all of the sex in me.

It was quiet in the apartment and it was hot when I finally turned away from her. We had moved into the bedroom after the first violent flurry. I lit two cigarettes and then we lay side by side in the dark, smoking. The only sound was our breathing.

Finally, I looked at her and said, "Why me, Mavis?"

I saw her head turn. Her mouth was inches from mine. She was quiet for a long moment, and then she said, "The money. The fifteen grand."

My heart leaped and my stomach knotted, but I managed to keep my voice steady. "What fifteen grand?"

"Don't argue with me Duke. Remember, I know Harry Dill."

"So?"

"So Harry says you've got fifteen thousand from a bank hidden someplace. Harry says he's going to get that fifteen thousand—and Harry says he's going to kill you *after* he gets the fifteen thousand."

"Harry Dill is crazy."

"I don't think so. I looked it up in the newspapers. So I don't think Harry is so goddamn crazy."

"Look, Mavis, you—"

"No, you look, Duke," she interrupted. "Do you think you would have been paroled without help? You would have stayed in that place until you rotted. The State wasn't going to let you out. You'd have been kept there on one pretext or another—if Harry hadn't spent some money in the right places. And Harry doesn't spend money for nothing. Especially for you. He figures on getting a nice, neat profit. Me? Where do I come in? In a way, it's funny. Harry likes me, and Harry says just as soon as he gets the dough, away we go—like a couple of birds. That's tonight—as soon as I get you to take me to where you hid—"

"Mavis, you've been smoking weed."

"No. I know what I'm talking about, Duke. You here—it's a set-up. I bring you up here, we have a little go 'round, you're nuts about me, I talk you into taking me away from here, far far away, we go get the dough, and Harry's right behind us. Get the picture?"

"Crazy."

"Is it?" She sat up in the bed then, and I could feel her eyes boring down on me. "The only thing crazy about it is if it comes off that way. It won't."

"No?" I said cautiously.

"Because it's going to be me and you, Duke. That's the only way I get cut in. Harry says he's going to cut me in. But you know something? I don't believe Harry. No, sir, I don't believe one goddamn word of that crap. You? You're different. You're going to cut me in."

"Why?"

"Because that's the only way you're ever going to get the dough—as long as Harry's alive. He's on you, Duke. Day and night. You don't make a move, and he's on you like a blanket. It could be years that way. Harry ain't so goddamn old. It could be a long time. But with me. . . ."

She let it hang there.

"Yeah?" I said after a long while.

"We do it just like he says. We leave here—now. Harry will follow us. Sooner or later he'll make his play. And that's when you kill him."

"Ki—My God, baby, you're—"

"It's the only way, Duke!"

All I had to do was get up and walk out of her place. That's all I really had to do—if I could.

"You don't *have* to take me with you, Duke. Just give me a cut. Say five thousand. It should be worth that much to you to get the money—and to get rid of Harry."

I turned it over in my mind. In a way, she was making sense. But it was wild.

"All right," she said. "Tell you what I'll do. *I'll* kill him."

Fifteen grand. In a tin box. In the ground. How long would it be until I could get my hands on it? How many years?

"It doesn't make sense, baby."

"Doesn't it?"

"You. This place. The convertible. You've got it comfy. What's five G's to you?"

"This is Harry's place, Duke. The convertible is Harry's. I belong to Harry. He pays for this place, the convertible, and me."

"On cop's pay? Don't crap me."

"Not cop's pay, Duke. Payoffs—on the street. The houses, the pushers. He's got it organized."

"I'd forgotten."

"I'm reminded of it—every day. And I hate that, Duke. I hate it so much I can't stand it any more. Do you understand?"

"I think I could," I said slowly.

Her fingers found my arm and I felt them dig in. "Then you'll do it?"

I was quiet for a long while, and then I said, "Let's go, baby."

She laughed softly and rolled out of bed. But actually she had nothing to be elated about. Because in a couple of hours she was going to be dead—with Harry Dill. I'd figured a way.

We were in the convert and rolling through the city toward McCome within ten minutes. It was early, three o'clock in the morning, and she pushed the convert at a fast pace. But the car behind us stayed right on our tail.

The first gray light of dawn was stealing out of the east horizon when we drove through McCome two hours later. The morning was muggy with a threat of storm; thunder rumbled in the west sky and there were stitches of lightning. I told Mavis where to turn off the highway. She drove slowly beneath the pine trees that stretched straight into the sky. I looked behind us. Nothing in sight. I

told her to stop. And then I got out.

"Watch for him," I said.

She lifted the .45 in her hand and smiled at me. "I'll watch."

I walked to a tree and started digging the ground with my fingers. Suddenly, they touched metal. It was the shovel—exactly where I had put it—how many years before? For some reason I couldn't remember. It seemed like a hundred. Standing, I smiled over my shoulder at Mavis, and then I walked six paces toward the river, turned right, walked six more paces, turned toward the river, six more paces, right, six more paces—and began digging. It seemed an eternity, but it probably was less than two minutes when the shovel struck metal. I went down on my knees and scooped the loose dirt off of the box and took the box out of the hole. Then I ran straight toward the convert. Mavis was still in the front seat, and the area around her was empty.

I jerked open the front door. "Got it!" I gasped. "And he isn't around. Let's get the hell out of here!"

"I'm around, Duke!"

The voice came from behind me, and I froze in the seat for an instant. Then I twisted my head slowly. Harry Dill was standing by the right rear taillight. He was smiling coldly, and he had a gun in his hand. The gun was pointed straight at me.

I felt Mavis' hand. Slowly, it took the tin box from my lap and, just as slowly, it pressed the .45 into my hand.

"Get out," Harry Dill said. "I don't want a mess in the car."

Turning, I opened the door of the convert. I moved easily, bringing the .45 up slow, hiding it with the back of the seat.

"Thanks for the small favor, Duke," Harry Dill said. "I figured that sooner or later—"

But that's all he got out. The blast from the .45 was loud in the still morning. Harry Dill went down fast, and he didn't move.

"Look at him!" Mavis hissed.

"To hell with him! Let's roll!"

"My God, he still might be alive!"

She was making sense. I piled out of the convert and rolled Harry over on his back. Mavis backed the convert around, turning it out toward the highway. I squatted down beside Harry. He was dead okay. I started to get up. And then I shouted crazily as Mavis slipped the convert into gear and roared away from me.

Insanely, I ran down the road after her, jerking the trigger of the .45. But there were no blasts. And the big, twin taillights disappeared quickly. And with them my fifteen grand.

Finally, I fell to my knees and stayed that way a long time, breathing harshly. It was quite a while before I got my senses back and started thinking straight. I checked the magazine of the .45. Empty.

In a way, it was slick. She had talked me into taking her to the money. She had provided the .45—with *one* slug. She had made me kill Harry Dill. And now—she had the green while I had, what? A dead cop!

Me holler copper on her? Me, a guy on parole? Me, a guy that had a reason for wanting Harry Dill dead? No, I wasn't going to holler copper. And she'd realized it.

So what could I do? There was only one thing. Bury Harry Dill, pray to God he would never be found, and disappear.

Slowly, I got to my feet and went back to the tree and got my shovel.

Maybe someday I'll find Mavis. . . .

Something of Value

Burglars broke into a restaurant in Vallejo, Calif., but found the cash register empty. So they took the cash register, valued at $800.

Dereliction of Duty

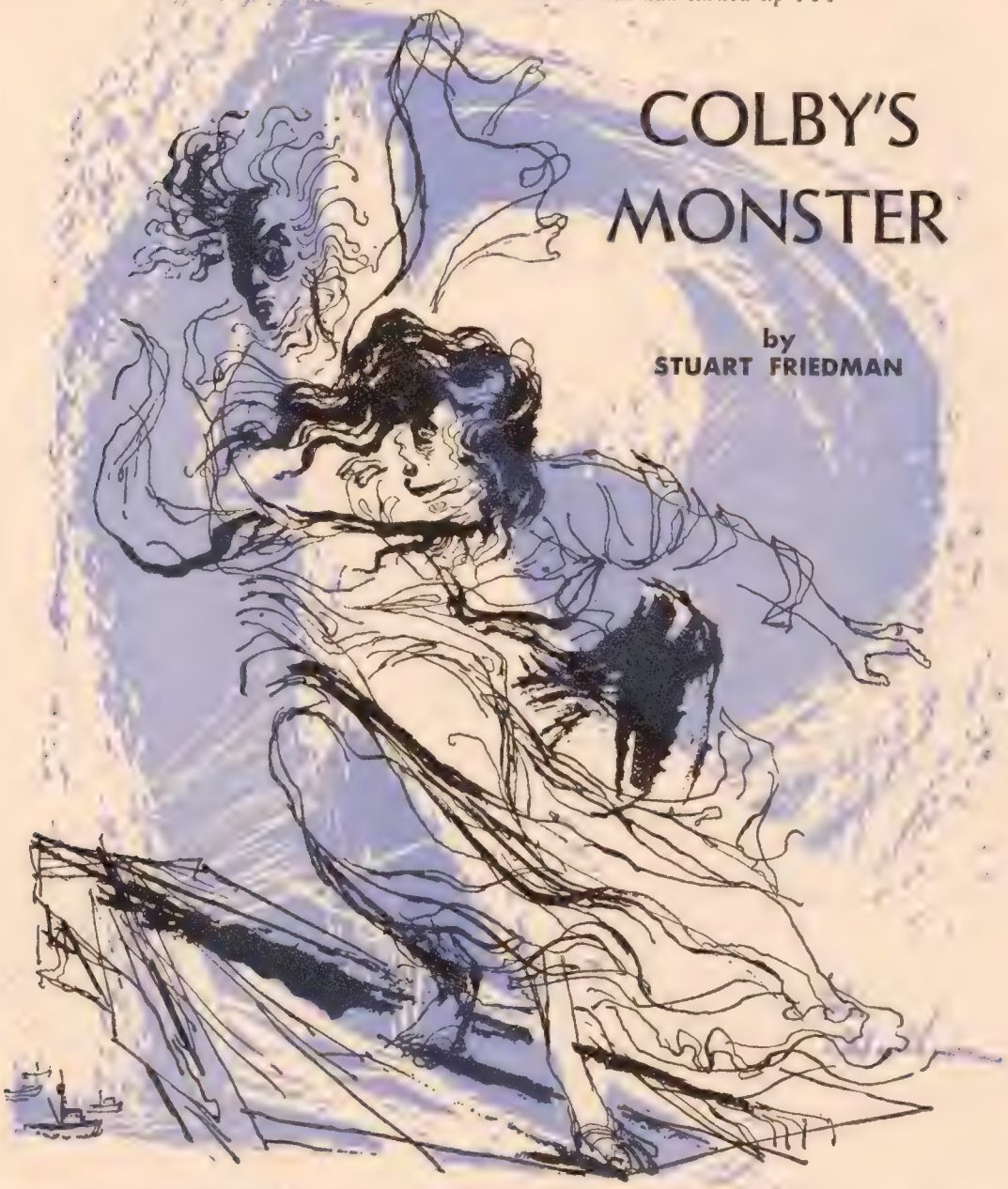
Grand Rapids, Mich., police apprehended a 17-year-old youth after a 110 mile an hour chase during which his car collided with a police ambulance. After his arrest, the boy admitted stealing the car and committing several burglaries.

His mother scolded officers. "Why aren't you cleaning up crime and corruption in Grand Rapids instead of arresting young boys like my son?" she asked.

Colby had made her a star, and now she was pushing him around. He didn't know what to do—until the madman turned up . . .

COLBY'S MONSTER

by
STUART FRIEDMAN



THE RINGING scraped through his sleep like sandpaper and Colby woke hungover and slashing mad. The call could only be from one person or the servants would never have switched it to his bedside extension at nine ayem. Damn her, he wouldn't answer, he thought defiantly. Then a bare arm, belonging to the 37-24-35 job under the covers of the other twin bed, glided out and felt for the phone. Colby snatched the handset. That's all he'd need, to have another woman answer!

"Skip Colby speaking!" He was shaky and his heart beat like panic, but he got the bounce and to-hell-with-it laughter that was his trademark into his voice.

"I called twice already," said Hollywood's goddess of Sexless Sex. Then, putting a snap-of-the-fingers quality into her tone she said: "I'll be on the sundeck." She hung up.

That's the way the whip cracks, Colby shrugged. Frankenstein's monster had been ugly and stronger than its creator; the only difference was that Colby's monster was beautiful. His grin looked like it had been nailed to his teeth. He washed and dressed, his anger in tight control He was about to leave when his attention fixed on the sleeping girl.

He tiptoed to her bedside. He clutched the mattress handles and heaved, dumping her to the floor. She squawked, pawed the air and kicked her naked legs. Colby went around and stood over her. She stared up at him with startled eyes. Suddenly her

face puckered and she began to whimper like a frightened baby. He saw the streaked mascara and remembered hearing her cry herself to sleep . . . because he had treated her contemptibly. He crouched down, feeling a wave of remorse and his hand moved on an impulse of tenderness toward her cheek. He stopped himself, took the wallet out of his hip pocket. The best bandages were green, he thought bitterly.

"Here's something extra," he said, pressing a bill into her hand. "Because I gave you a bad time last night."

She sniffed, raised her head, squinted at the denomination of the bill. "I don't mind if you treat me bad when you treat me good this way. Gee, Skip, thanks."

He stood up, tossed another ten down at her. "Here's for a cab. Whatever you do, don't answer the phone. I'm off."

He went out and around the swimming pool. Last night he'd hurt her; this morning a little extra money had her smiling happily. He despised her. There was a flat, hard smile on his lean, handsome face as he tooled the red Jag out to the road and went racing . . . because his creation, the goddess of Sexless Sex had snapped her fingers. He didn't grovel happily for a little extra money, but for a lot. Two grand a week. For that he couldn't despise himself; that was big enough for hate. The trouble with hate was that it destroyed his sense of humor.

His sense of humor, ironically, had created Mary Maine, Hollywood's goddess of Sexless Sex . . . alias Colby's monster. When Skip Colby had brought his superconfident personality west from the Broadway publicity mills to the dream factories seven years ago he had had a built-in geyser of ideas and a motto: "If you're selling balloons by the cubic yard blow them up!" But everybody out here was blowing up balloons and peddling bright new ideas, or stealing them. It had occurred to Skip that it would be a hilarious joke to take one of the studios' oldest and most profitable ideas, give it a college degree and cap and gown and sell it right back to them.

The idea was simply that people liked sex and they liked innocence. They wanted sin without guilt; they wanted to enjoy sensual stimulation without having to know the cause. Colby ballooned the idea with the ponderous jargon of the social scientists and psychologists, quoting Freud, Jung, Adler.

Scripts would no longer be written, but scientifically manufactured, and they must, of course, be morality tales. There would be a heroine with a body that incited to riot and an angelic, passionless face that totally denied the sexiness of her body. She would be surrounded by the action, but remain basically passive herself, and while she would rouse the forces of good and evil she would somehow seem to have no will of her own. She would be a symbol of chastity who ignited the emotions but was never guilty of thought or feeling. No line of her dialogue should ever indicate that she didn't believe storks brought babies. She would be the ideal of virtue and so properly dull that no one could object to her. The scenes wherein, despite herself, her body was lusciously revealed, and the other scenes in which the forces of evil almost got the little girl would have nothing to do with the angel girl herself. It would be almost shocking even to notice.

A girl was found to fill the specifications, and she was named Mary Maine, and Skip Colby took charge of her, appointing himself her manager, agent, script adviser, publicity chief and bedmate. He'd fallen so hard for her that he'd have married her except that marriage wasn't exactly consistent with the public image of her as the eternal virgin. She had six fabulous box office successes, during which she looked on him as John God in person.

Then, just three months ago she had received a crackpot letter, not much different from thousands, but more intense. But when Skip had laughed she had flared up at him for the first time. Nothing would do but that she meet the letter writer. The creep was one of those underfed, hot-eyed mystics, often found living in caves, eating nuts and herbs and ranting against the sins of the flesh. This one, who called himself John St. Garland, lived in a hall bedroom, wrote radio commercials, and purred against the sins of the flesh. He had seen all her movies a dozen times and he worshipped her. He had swallowed the purity myth, hook, line and sinker. The horror was that Mary began to swallow it too. She began to speak in high-flown phrases about keeping the faith with her public and with her higher self. She began to see Skip Colby as the personification of things coarse and low and two months ago she quit sleeping with him.

Colby had tried ridicule, anger, seduction. Nothing seemed to bring her back to her senses. His influence over her had slipped down near the vanishing point. She was still a little in awe of him, and her own success was tied up so closely to him that she was afraid of a professional break. But she was getting braver, and she knew quite well and liked quite well her power at the studios, Colby thought grimly as he parked the Jag.

Colby walked out onto the sundeck to find her lying on her back wearing eyepads and a gleaming coat of scented oil. His shadow glided up her graceful feet and slim, exquisite legs, across the flat of her belly and over the soft, perfect rounds of her breasts. He stopped at her feet, covering her entirely with his shadow. A delicately made, beautiful little creature she lay unaware and as still as death. The flashing thought that she might really be dead sent an intense, stabbing pain through his eyes, and the floral scent of her body oil hung

there in the still air and he thought of organ music. Flowers and organ music . . as at a funeral. A horrible thought! Then he saw the faint lifting of her breasts and the subtly exciting tremor of motion in the soft flesh of her belly. He laughed at himself, flowers and organ music meant wedding.

She peeled off the eyepads, blinked those huge, childish eyes, a sweetly vacant expression on her heart-shaped face. Then she recognized him and thrust her cherub lips petulantly. Skip laughed and teased:

"Angel, is this any way to receive a mere earth man? Tsk tsk."

"The pure eye gazes without lust."

"So sayeth Droopy?"

"His name is John St. Garland."

"His name," Skip said lightly, "is Garland Johnston. The saint stuff is fake."

"Fake is a harsh word. He selected a name suitable to himself just as you did for me."

"Does Droopy ogle you naked . . . uh, lemme de-harsh that . . . Does St. Fake behold you nude?"

"If he pleases. The pure eye gazes without lust."

"You delivered that line already. With him it's just a form of contemplation. I see why they didn't understand him at that theological seminary he got kicked out of."

"Oh, you big liar . . . I never heard of any theo- uh—whatever . . . aren't you?"

"A big liar? Sure. You ought to know what a colossal liar I am . . . or Mary Maine wouldn't be dragging down 150 Gs per pic."

"I mean about him being at a cemetery or whatever."

Skip shrugged, dragged a tube chair alongside her sunning mat, flopped down. "Who knows truth from balloons any more? You know what you are, for instance? Do I know? No. And he never, I mean but *never* touches you? . . . no smooch, clinch, pinch, pat here and there . . . not even on the hand?"

"It's the real me he loves, not my flesh."

"Scared of germs. Probably chased by one at a tender age."

She looked witheringly at him and snapped. "His is a beautiful love."

"Immortal. He'd probably like to keep you forever. In small pieces. In an old trunk. That's how his type ends up."

"Shut up, Skip," she warned.

He got out a cigarette, lit it shakily. "Shut up, huh? Listen good; I'm telling you something. There's a chapter in every book on abnormal psychology about his type. And a whole library of police files on babies like him." He got agitatedly to his feet, paced up and down. "This's new, this ogling you naked. He's worse than I thought."

"I warned you, stop smearing him. He's coming here, that's why I called you. I hoped we could all work together in the future, but . . ."

"But if we can't?" He stopped and stared intently at her. She was sitting up and she had herself partially covered with a towel, and her face emerged as though detached from her body. He made a slicing gesture across his throat: "If we can't it's *skeek*, off with Skip's head?"

She hunched her shoulders and looked down, distressed. "It couldn't come to that . . . after all you've done for me . . . but he'd have a say in decisions affecting my career . . . an important say . . ."

He shook his head. "Unpaid consultant? A humble servant to the ideal of Innocence?" he said mockingly.

"He's got to eat like anybody else."

"But good. Ah, well, it's like they say in this town: never too late to catch the gravy train. Just come up with a new angle, like this spiritual stuff. That's a real cute gimmick here in wolftown. Really flipped you."

"You can't think of anything but base motives, can you. It's either greed or lust . . . and then you wonder why I need someone who believes in something . . . someone who truly understands what my screen personality represents. *You* think Mary Maine is just a smart, big-money formula. You don't understand that my screen personality is the real me."

"Flipped . . ."

"Please! I don't want to have to . . ."

"Get tough with me, throw me out?"

"I don't want to. Please I hear him coming. Try to understand him and work with him."

Skip looked towards the stairs, heard the slow, scuffing step of sandals. "I didn't hear a car; how'd he arrive? Spread his wings . . . ?"

"He's staying at the guest house."

"Right on the property . . . Well, I'll be da—"

Mary hissed: "He can hear . . . . don't swear in front of him . . . he's terribly sensitive. . . ." She undraped the towel from her shoulders and started to lie down again.

"Cover yourself, damn you," he gritted. "I won't have him. . . ."

She rolled over on her stomach, ignoring him. In a rage he grabbed up her robe and was about to hurl it at her when Droopy emerged onto the sundeck.

Skip felt an actual cold chill. The guy had degenerated fast. At this stage he was decked out in a white robe and sandals, and he'd begun to let his dark hair grow, and his long face was thinner and paler than ever, and the eyes were not merely hot, they were fevered. For the first time Skip was afraid in a new way. This was no mild lunatic, but a dangerous cookie, and no fooling.

"Good morning, Mr. Colby." He didn't offer his hand nor look at him. The eyes had fixed at once on Mary, and they never left her. "And to you a good morning, Mary."

"Did you sleep well?" She turned her head, smiled up sweetly.

"The sleep of the guiltless is deep," he purred, looking down steadily at her bare body.

"Listen, Saint," Skip said belligerently. "If it's all the same to the pure eye, contemplate other scenic wonders. Try a tree."

"The harsh sound destroys the harmonious whole," Droopy intoned as he took a chair. He continued staring at her.

"You're getting too much sun," Skip said, and put her robe over her. "Now, cover yourself, sit up, and cut this comedy . . . and as for you, Droopy, you're in, so come to the point. What's your price?"

Mary put on her robe and jumped to her feet and shrilled; "I warned you. Now you can just get out."

Colby nodded slowly at her. "All right, Mary." He looked at Droopy, who sat as though deaf, staring now at Mary's face . . . . the only part of her visible. Colby watched him thoughtfully, then said in a deliberate, soft voice. "A pure, beautiful face, isn't it?"

"Divine."

"The very soul of innocence and purity," Skip said, even more quietly. "It's almost a shame, isn't it, that such an exalted face, so far above the flesh, should be connected with corrupt, low, animal flesh?"

Skip watched hawkishly, saw a brief flicker of excitement around his thin lips.

Mary suddenly hit Skip's arm. "What're you up to," she demanded.

He ignored her. "If only," Skip said, moving closer to the entranced man, "if only it could be preserved, that beauty, that purity. If only it could be detached, saved from the corruption of the flesh! If only that beautiful head could be cut off!"

Droopy smiled. It was the first time he'd ever seen a smile on that face, and it didn't belong there. Skip glanced sharply at Mary who was staring in horror.

Skip snapped his fingers under Droopy's nose. "O. K., Saint . . . . up and out! Up and out, bag and baggage!" He snapped his fingers again. "Move before I start breaking you up."

Skip stood over him, a fist cocked, his eyes watchful, his whole body tensely alert. For five . . . ten . . . fifteen eternal seconds the gaunt, robed figure sat motionless, a faint pink flush on his emaciated face, his eyes crinkled, his thin mouth upcurved in that ugly smile. Skip heard the quick sluff-sluff of Mary's feet, felt her warm pressure against his arm, heard her nervous whisper:

"Watch him, Skip."

He didn't answer. The flush had begun to recede from the hollow cheeks, the upcurved mouth sagged down, and the hot eyes were again staring. . . . the mask was back in place. Skip had a queer moment of pity that it had been ripped off, almost a sense of shame for having done it. He didn't touch the man as he rose composedly and walked across the sundeck to the stairs. He followed him to the guest house and watched him pack his few belongings.

"Better put on street clothes," Skip advised, "and get a haircut. If you're a little strapped for cash . . . ."

The man heard and swung his gaze around and stared at him with such a depth of pure hate that Skip felt the hair crawl on the back of his neck.

"O. K! buddy," Skip said venomously. He looked at his watch. "Two minutes. If you're not out of here and into your heap and moving I'll wipe you all over this floor! One minute and fifty-four seconds left!"

"Hit me and you'll have a pretty lawsuit on your hands, you and your—"

"Don't call her that, Droopy. So, you're not quite out of touch with worldly matters after all, huh? Lemme take a prowl through that suitcase. . . ."

As Skip stepped toward it, Droopy made his first quick move. Skip smacked the flat of his hand against his chest. "Easy, boy, easy," he threatened in a low voice. "I'm going to look in here, over your dead body or not."

He squatted beside the suitcase, and prowled it, flicking cautious glances at Droopy who stood blinking and gnawing at his lip.

"Oh oh . . . . " Skip felt some odd contours in what had appeared to be a pair of rolled socks. Presently he had the contents out of the sock. Pictures. A whole gallery of pornography. "Whew-whew," Skip said, shuffling through the pictures. "Man . . . oh . . . man, and I thought I'd seen everything . . . ."

"Put 'em back, they're none of your affair."

"That's so true, Droopy! What *is* my business is the shots of Mary. Where are *they?* The pix of Mary naked? . . . you could really cash in on her, the Purity girl sprawled out naked on a sundeck. . . . ." Skip got up slowly, moved to Droopy, lashed out. The blow knocked him down. "Get up," Skip said impassively. He drew back his foot, threateningly. The man got to his feet. Skip felled him again. "Up . . . down . . . up . . . down . . . C'mon, get up, Droopy."

"O. K., o. k. I haven't got any of her. I took a roll of films, but it's undeveloped. The camera's in the heel of that brown shoe."

Skip got the shoe, pried off the hollowed heel. "Ah . . . a real sneaky little camera, and a good one, too . . . I'll just keep this, Droopy. In case there are any more, Droopy, and in case any one of them ever gets printed . . . y'know who is going to be a dead man? I'm a laughing guy, Droopy, but I can get damned serious when it comes to a million-buck property."

"I would never have published. I just wanted to have her picture, privately. I love . . . ."

"Shut up and get out. Fast. I wouldn't know how to get rid of your corpse. I'm mean, I warn you, don't give me any more cause than I got already. OUT!"

Mary called: "I'm in here," when he came back to the sundeck.

"He's gone," Skip said tiredly, entering the bedroom.

"I know. I know." She hurried to him, her robe parting as she spread her arms. "Skip darling, you were superb, the way you showed him up." She laced her arms around his neck, merged her warm body against him and turned her beautiful face up to him adoringly.

"You'll get my clothes greasy. Take a shower and get dressed," he said pushing her away.

"You punishing me, Skip?"

"I need a drink."

She detached herself, scurried across the room to the tiny bar, took ice from the wall box. She was splashing Scotch over the rocks when he reached her. He tossed the little camera on the bar, then the film rolled across. "Pix of you naked!"

"NO!"

"Yes."

She looked down, flushing. "You have to be nasty? You chased him off; you showed him up and me up and . . . . oh, Skippy-Wippy . . ."

He gagged. "Can the skippy-wippy." He joggled the ice and whiskey around, chilling it, then lifted the glass and drained it off.

"More, darling?"

"Get showered. We'll go up to your place on the coast."

"Wonderful, Skip. It'll be just like old . . . ."

"Till the next crackpot comes along!"

"Skip, I promise."

"Uh-huh!"

"I do. I promise. I was stupid, fake, awful . . . . but never again. I promise."

"You'd keep it better if I'd kept the films to blackmail you with." He laughed harshly. "You should've seen St. Fake's collection of pix. I puketh."

He dozed while she was showering and then again in the car on the ride up the coast. By the time they reached her place around sundown he was feeling better. She cooked his dinner and she was in one of those contrite sweet-child moods, and in the dusklight after the dinner her face was so softly enchanting it made his chest ache.

"Please love me again, Skip."

"I'm not sure I ever stopped."

"You didn't. And I didn't you."

"Agh. Don't lie."

"Honest. Just because he loved . . . . or I thought he loved me doesn't mean I did him. He was like a . . . . I dunno . . . ."

"A worshipper."

"That's just it. And I tell you, it's funny the gr-r-r-ry feeling of delicious power it gives you."

"Love that feel, huh?"

"Not really . . . . but . . . ."

"But . . ." He laughed. "Let's walk. I need some sea wind to blow the nightmare out of my head."

"With you."

It was dark as they started up the winding, climbing path. The path was narrow and walled in by evergreens and shrubs which reduced the wind to whispers and gave Colby a feeling of oppression. It suddenly occurred to him that he had created Mary Maine to fulfill a wish of his own for sexual pleasure without guilt. . . . His mouth twisted. Created? Not even that; he'd just analyzed and stolen the ingredients and lived off the proceeds.

Mary, her quick, graceful little figure in slacks, moved along just ahead of him, smiling back occasionally, and now and then reaching back to squeeze his hand intimately, as if nothing had broken between them. He could never love her as deeply again, nor trust her entirely. She'd never quite forget the delicious feeling of a worshipper at her feet, like a million of her fans wrapped up in one package. When the need to use her power on someone came on again and she felt safe to use it, she'd turn on him . . . and if he took it he'd turn into something he could never quit hating.

They reached an open expanse of flat rock like a giant arrowhead in flight over the sea. She smiled and half-ran toward the seaward point of the rock, unpinning her hair to fly dark and loose on the wind. He came up more slowly behind her as she reached the outermost point of the rock. He watched her as she stared straight down at the moon-white stallion heads of surf crashing into the rough stone masses a hundred feet below. She turned to him, smiling, and then her wide eyes became very wide and in the dull light he could see the flattening of her cheeks as her smile faded.

She clutched his arm. "He's here," she whispered.

"You're imagining . . ." Colby glanced around.

"No. He's been here. He knows how to get . . . . There! See him . . . .?"

"Yes," Skip breathed. There was a barely discernible motion of shadow on shadow there at the edge of the trees at the lower end of the rock.

"Better get down," he said, crouching a little himself. "Might have a gun."

Colby moved forward swiftly, watching the dim area where he had seen the moving of the shadow, thirty or forty feet away. He kept hoping it was imagination. Then, when he was within a dozen feet of the trees his heart began to slam. He could make out a man's figure distinctly.

He bolted toward it at a dead run, his body crouched as low as possible. He didn't see the knife fly past. He heard it clank to the rock some-

where behind him. At the same moment, the man burst out into full view on the rock. Colby broke pace, made a grabbing leap sidewards but the figure was out of reach, running past him. Mary began to scream, and she fell scrambling to the surface of the rock as she tried to evade him.

Droopy was picking her up and moving as fast as he could toward the cliff point before Colby reached. He slugged the back of his head, but when he went down he kept a death grip on Mary.

Colby kept punching his head, then he got a stranglehold on his windpipe and held it. Finally he felt the Creep's body relax and Mary, who'd been punching at him, broke free. She yanked her shoe off and came in snarling to pound his face with the heel.

"Don't cut him up," Colby said, panting. "He's out; he's safe now."

"Why, damn him I'll *kill* the sonofa . . . ." She began to sob, frightened and furious. Colby had to haul her back to keep her from attacking the unconscious figure again.

"Let me at him! . . . I'll kill him! . . ."

"Now, calm down. Don't cry. Don't be scared. But don't cut him up . . . let the rocks down there cut him up. . . . Grab his other arm, and help me."

"Well, I will, I will . . . ."

Just before he went over he came to and started to scream. Then there was just the roar of the wind and surf.

Colby grinned at her. "Now, baby, you're a killer."

"That scream!" she said, shuddering. "Whew . . ."

"Remember this next time you get to feeling that you can kick the old Skip out." He began to laugh. She stared at him.

"There won't be any way of getting rid of you, you mean?"

"I mean."

"No way but one." She started to laugh. "What a bang!"

Everybody's Even

John Schubert, 48, of Milwaukee, Wis., couldn't figure out why all the fuss was going on. He admitted he had robbed the same tavern twice within two months. "But," he added, "I spent every cent of my loot at the tavern's bar."

Bad Example

In Fort Dodge, Ia., police arrested a man after he smashed into a parked car, backed up three blocks, turning two corners, crashed into another vehicle and then fled. The accused driver was Frank Burns, Fort Dodge commissioner of finance and public safety.

Seekers of Knowledge

Burglars in Melbourne, Australia, entered a print shop and stole 10,000 copies of a booklet. The booklets described the best methods to thwart crime.

STATEMENT

Required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as Amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) Showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Manhunt, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y.

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Michael St. John
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 16th day of December, 1957.

[seal] Blanche Wadsworth, *Notary Public*
(My commission expires March 12, 1959.)

THE HIT

"He don't trust anybody—not even his own brother," Momo told Mike. "But we'll find a way to get close to him and kill him. . . ."

A Novelette

by ALSON J. SMITH

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when he woke up. He stretched out on the bed in his underwear and lit a cigarette. When he was through with the cigarette he would have to look up Momo. By now Momo would know that he was in New Orleans. It would not do to keep Momo waiting.

He smoked the cigarette almost down to the filter tip. Finally he crushed it out in the ash tray on the bedside table, went into the bathroom, and surveyed himself in the full-length mirror on the door. He thought he looked a little pale. He ran his hand uncertainly over his dark, almost-handsome, slightly pock-marked face, feeling the faint stubble of beard.

He did not like to admit it, but he was not sure of himself. What are you shook up for, he said irritably to the figure in the mirror. You're Mike LiMandri, one of the toughest young guys in Chicago, and one of the best-looking, too. You're going places; Johnny likes you; they all like you. You're a hep, hard-rock Chicago *paisan,* and they can't dish out anything in this chicken-farmers town that you can't handle.

That's what he told himself, but he felt funny anyway. He supposed they all felt funny the first time—Willie The Weeper, Needle-Nose Nick, Little Joe From Cicero—all the old pro's. But he wasn't one of them. He was only Mike LiMandri, barely twenty-three years old, and he wished to God he didn't have the contract. The only reason they had given it to him was because his old man was a friend of the guy's.

The last thing he wanted to do was to look up Momo, but he couldn't put it off any longer. Momo would be waiting. He washed, shaved, put on his sharp, forest-green, Shantung silk suit, and started

out to find the Cafe Lafitte.

He stopped by the old Spanish Cabildo behind the three-towered Cathedral of St. Louis. He had the directions right. Across the street was a small bar with a sign over the door showing a fierce one-eyed pirate brandishing an upraised cutlass. The inscription was weathered but clear: CAFE LAFITTE.

He crossed the street and entered the bar. It was dark inside. Three men were drinking beer. They paid no attention to him. He pulled up a bar stool and sat down.

The bartender, skinny and red-haired, polished the space in front of him. "What'll it be?"

"You got some kind of special drink down here?"

"You must mean a Sazerac. Pernod, sugar, and bourbon? Yeah, we got it. Best in the Quarter."

"Shake me up one."

The bartender grinned. "You don't shake a Sazerac, buddy. You tease it." He mixed the drink deftly and strained it into a cocktail glass.

Mike put his hands on the bar, leaned over, and slurped up a little of the overflowing liquid. It was smooth and strong. "That's a drink, Mac," he said approvingly. He smacked his gum loudly and grinned at the bartender.

As he sipped the Sazerac, he gradually became aware of the fact that someone was watching him. The three silent beer-drinkers were gazing mournfully into their suds. He half turned; in the booth farthest away from the bar, he saw the glow of a cigarette through the gloom. He could not see the smoker. The red eye of the cigarette seemed to be winking deliberately at him.

He had to be careful. He looked around. To get to the Men's Room, he would have to go past that dim booth where someone sat smoking and watching.

He drained his glass and called to the bartender, "Let's go again, Mac." He dropped a five-dollar bill on the bar, and walked slowly towards the Men's Room.

He looked straight ahead, but his eyes slid towards the booth. A big, bald man was sitting there alone, smoking a cigarette. Beside him was a large white felt hat.

Momo. Mike went on into the Men's Room. The Cafe Lafitte was air-conditioned, but he was sweating. He wiped his brow and replaced the handkerchief carefully in the upper left-hand pocket of his expensive silk suit. He ran a comb nervously through the thick black hair, growing a little too long down the back of his neck. His hands trembled ever so slightly.

He went out, and hesitated beside the booth. The man did not look up. "Mr. Masseria?"

He looked up then. He had a white, square, smashed-in face above a bull neck and massive shoulders; his eyes were brown with heavy black lashes streaked with gray; the muscle on the powerful frame was sagging and turning to fat.

2.

"I been expecting you," he said. He had an absurd, high-pitched, almost-feminine voice. "Get your drink and bring it over here."

"Yes, Mr. Masseria." Mike went to the bar, picked up his fresh Sazerac and his change, and dropped into the booth across from the big, bald-headed man with the broken face.

"Wait a minute." Momo heaved himself up out of the booth. "I want you should try the shrimp. We got the best shrimp in the world down here." He waddled over to the bar. "Get us a plate of shrimp," he said to the bartender. "Tell Andy to put some garlic in the sauce." The bartender disappeared into the kitchen.

Momo lowered himself back into the booth. He regarded Mike speculatively from beneath the heavy black brows.

"I knew your old man. We come over on the same boat."

"I know," said Mike. "Johnny told me."

The bartender came in with a plate of tiny green Gulf shrimp arranged around a cup of cocktail sauce. Mike finished the Sazerac and handed the glass to the bartender. "I'll have another with the shrimp," he said.

"No, you won't," said Momo rudely. "The drink will kill the flavor. Besides, we got to talk business." He dismissed the bartender with a wave of his hand. "No more drinks."

Mike started to say something. "Wait a minute," the big man said, and there was authority in the high-pitched voice. "I'll talk, *paisan*. You listen."

He scowled petulantly for a minute. Then he said: "You're at the Hotel Monteleone, ain't you? Well, you can't stay there. Too conspicuous. Get a room in some flea-bag in the Quarter. There's a dump over on Conti Street called the Hotel Napoleon. Buck and a half a night. It's right across from the Amalfi Spaghetti House, where you'll be working."

"What kind of a job I got? Waiter?"

"Waiter, hell! You ever done any waiting? That's work! You'll be assistant cashier. That means you're cashier during the slow times, afternoons and like that. And keep your hands out of the goddam till. Don't try to score over there."

Mike's throat was so dry he could hardly speak. "How—how long, you figure?"

"Well, this bastard isn't easy to hit. We tried a couple times. He won't get into a car with nobody, even his own brother. He won't let nobody walk behind him. He never answers the door or sits by a window. He's a very hard man to hit, this fine Mr. Paulo Marchese! But we're gonna hit

him, *paisan!* Take as much time as you need."

"How do I make it? Johnny said you'd have it all figured."

Momo got up. "Come in here." He led the way into a little room marked 'Office,' and carefully closed and locked the door. He went to a desk and brought out two revolvers. One was a heavy, black, .45 calibre Colt. The other was a pearl-handled, snub-nosed little .26, so small in comparison with the Colt that it looked like a toy.

Momo said: "These pieces are O.K. The numbers have been filed down." He studied the revolvers. "The Colt will blow a man's head half off. But it makes a lot of noise. The little bull-dog makes only a tiny wound, but a man with a little hole in his heart is just as dead as a guy with his head blown to pieces. You will take them both, but you will make the hit with the little bull-dog. Then you will throw it away."

"What do I do with the Colt?"

"Keep it. It's registered in the name of Nick Miceli, who owns the Amalfi. You will say that Nick gave it to you because you are the assistant cashier and sometimes you have to take the money to the bank. They will ask Nick and he will say sure, that's right."

"What about the little gun I throw away?"

"It's O.K., I told you. My God, you're nervous. You some kind of a psycho or something?"

Mike tried to laugh. "No, Mr. Masseria, but I never had a contract before. I been a wheelman, did a few heists, ran a little stuff, but that was nothing compared with this. This is big for me, Mr. Masseria."

"You never had a contract before?" Momo's ugly, smashed-in face reddened. "Listen, if Johnny Borrio has sent a boy down here on a man's errand—." He was breathing heavily. "There is a vendetta to keep! You're a Siciliano, you know what that means. And you know what it means if you can't handle it!"

The palms of Mike's hands were damp. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Mr. Masseria. I'm a little nervous, but I'll handle it."

Momo looked sharply at him for a moment and then went on. "The gun you throw away will be traced. The numbers have been filed down, but not off. The cops, they got some stuff in the crime lab that will bring 'em out. They'll trace that bull-dog to a hardware store in Pass Christian, and the guy that runs the store will look up the number in a book and the book will show that he sold it to a Biloxi joe by the name of Adamo Vincent. Then the cops will remember that a joe by the name of Adamo Vincent was arrested two years ago for trying to kill somebody named Paulo Marchese. But Marchese wouldn't identify this other guinea, so they had to let him go."

Admiration shown through the worry on Mike's face. "My God, Mr. Masseria, it's perfect. But suppose they catch up with this Adamo what's-his-name?"

Momo studied the diamond solitaire on his left pinky. "Adamo Vincent? He was a nice boy, Mike, but very headstrong."

"Was?"

"Adamo was a very good triggerman, Mike, but he got a little hard to handle. After trying to hit Paulo he was hotter than three feet inside a furnace; the cops pulled him in every time he went out for a glass of beer. We were nice to him—sent him to California to live in a little cottage outside San Diego, and gave him plenty of gambling money. But he kept coming back, like a goddam cat you dump out in the country someplace and the goddam cat gets home before you do. We told him: 'Adamo, you and your pretty little wife and two fine bambinos must stay in sunny California and watch the swallows come back to Capistrano.' But he wouldn't listen. He missed the good shrimp and rice, he said. And every time he came back, he got loused up some way—with a broad, or something. Actually, he is at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain. They got some kind of man-eatin' fish in there; they're only three-four inches long, but they pick a guy right down to the bones in a couple hours."

3.

He sighed and speared a shrimp with a toothpick. "Not even his wife knows about it. We give her money and she stays out in sunny California like a good girl and asks no questions. When the police trace the gun to Adamo, they will hang the hit on him and his picture will be in all the post offices."

"What about me?"

"What about you? Nothing about you. You'll be a big hereo, *paisan,* for trying to protect your father's old friend from that bastard Adamo Vincent. You'll fire a couple of shots from the Colt after you throw away the little bull-dog. You will fire them at Adamo as he runs away. But alas, you will not hit him. How the hell can you hit him? He's down at the bottom of the lake with no skin on his bones! The cops will hold you for maybe forty-eight hours, but then they will have to let you go. It'll be a cinch, after they find Adamo's fingerprints on the bull-dog. They'll chase poor Adamo, but they won't look on the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain. Too bad."

Momo lit a cigarette. "Of course, you got to pick your own spot. You got to set it up. I can't do that for you." He inhaled and let the smoke drift slowly out of his broad, flat nose. "Well, that's it. You better go now. Have yourself a ball tonight. You want a girl? I got lots of girls. You go for red-heads? Listen, I got one with everything, just

right for you. I'll have her sent over to the hotel. Or you can go to one of my joints." He pulled three or four greasy little cards out of his pocket. "Just give 'em one of these." The cards contained the addresses of brothels with names like "The Red Rooster" and "The Lively Flea." They had 'Compliments of Mr. Giralomo Masseria' written in longhand on the backs.

Mike took the money. "Thanks, Mr. Masseria." Don't bother sending anybody to the hotel, Mr. Masseria. I get in the mood, I'll use one of these."

He got up to go. Momo said: "Wait, you're forgetting something." He put the two guns in a cheap imitation-leather briefcase. Then he reached into a box under the table, pulled out a shoulder-holster, and shoved that in with the guns. "Come back and see me every Friday afternoon until you make the hit. And listen, after you make it, keep your head. You got it made."

"Right, Mr. Masseria." Mike picked up the briefcase.

Momo pulled out a roll of bills. "You heeled? I want you should enjoy yourself down here. This is a hell of a town."

"Well, Johnny gave me—."

"Here." He peeled off three one hundred-dollar bills. "Need more, come around."

Mike took the money. "Thanks, Mr. Masseria."

He tried to have a ball that night. The warm, velvet air, the flower and coffee smell, the laughing people in the narrow streets of the Vieux Carrè, the hot jazz echoing from the cabarets, created an atmosphere of relaxed, sensuous pleasure. And yet at the same time it was unreal, and Mike felt it as an exotic but increasingly frightening nightmare, and wondered if he might not awaken in his old room in the flat on Larrabee Street in Chicago, with the stench of sweat, coal gas, and boiling pasta in his nostrils; awaken to find his trousers, patched and mended while he slept, lying over the chair beside his head. He would put on the trousers and go to the Franklin School, and then after school he would go to the North Avenue Boy's Club and play basketball. In the evening he would go to choir practice at the Church of St. Philip Benizi and wonder if maybe he had a vocation to be a priest, or, better yet, to play center for the Sox.

But in Bourbon Street the trumpets moaned like women in childbirth, and little Negro boys danced for pennies at the corner of Dauphine and Toulouse, and the creole girls lounging in the doorways near Congo Square had azaleas in their hair, and they called softly through the warm, flower-scented, velvet night: "Venez-ici, honee. I jus't wan talk to you a minute."

He had quite a few Sazeracs and, after four or five, he began to forget the briefcase in his room, and the pain in his heart eased. He tore up the cards Momo had given him. He did not want one of Momo's girls. He did not want a girl at all, really, but he needed to forget, and girls go very well with Sazeracs. He walked down towards Congo Square again, swaggering with self-conscious toughness, staggering a little, and finally heeding the soft voice in the soft night: "Venezi-ici, honee."

It was dawn when he staggered into the lobby of the hotel. He had spent almost a hundred dollars. He was very drunk.

4.

The vendetta between Momo Masseria and Paulo Marchese went back many years, to the time when they had landed in New Orleans from Palermo. Momo had not been *Capo Mafioso* then, but within a year old Joe "The Boss" Benedetto, the Handlebar Guy who ran the town, had died. Momo, toughest of the newly-arrived *Mafiusi,* had stepped into his shoes. Under his efficient rule, a golden torrent had poured into the coffers of The Outfit from brothels, gambling, narcotics, extortion, and labor racketeering.

Only one man refused to bow to the authority of the white hat and call Momo "Mr. Masseria." It was all very well, in the old country, to ride a horse up and down the Conca D'Oro, burning haystacks and exacting tribute from farmers, shopkeepers, and landlords, giving some of the money to the poor and spending the rest on *vino* and girls. It was a life for a young man, being a *Mafiusi,* a Green One. But in the new world, Paulo had wanted to have done with all that, to put down roots and give his children a home and a good name. He wanted to be *sparlata*—well spoken of. But he underestimated the tenaciousness of the old world and the Green Ones. He had laughed at Momo and ignored Momo's orders. So Momo had ordered that John Marchese, Paulo's younger brother, be beaten up as a warning. Momo's boys had overdone it; they had killed John Marchese. At the wake for John Marchese, Paulo had recognized one of Momo's boys. Wild with grief and rage, he had watched Momo's henchman walk up and place a kiss on the cold lips of the corpse. He had grabbed a shotgun from a kitchen closet and blasted the man's face to pieces. Twice after that Momo had tried to kill Paulo. Adamo Vincent had almost succeeded; his shot had grazed Paulo's cheek and left a long white scar. And in every instance *omerta,* the law of silence, had thwarted the police.

Momo had taken the vendetta to the highest authorities. They had held a kangaroo court, and decreed death for Paulo. They had picked Mike LiMandri to carry out the sentence because Mike's father and Paulo were old friends and Paulo was not likely to suspect Mike. It was their way.

Mike moved out of the Monteleone to the Hotel Napoleon and a dreary room with a threadbare red carpet, a cracked mirror, and a gaunt iron bed with the white enamel peeling off it. He laughed sourly when he saw the room. In his Shantung silk suit, he looked as out of place in the flea-bag as a Salvation Army lassie on the stage at Minsky's.

The job at the Amalfi Spaghetti House was a big nothing. Nick Miceli was a large, quiet man who had long since learned to see as little as possible, pay whatever was asked to whoever asked it, and keep his mouth shut. Mike went to work at two in the afternoon, when the luncheon crowd was beginning to thin, and stayed on until six, when the dinner crowd began arriving. From six until eight he made salads in the kitchen while Nick handled the cash register himself. Then he ate and left. For this Nick Miceli gravely paid him $55 a week and his meals.

One evening after work, when he had decided he couldn't put it off any longer, Mike stepped into a corner drugstore and called the Marchese's. He felt like hell.

Paulo's wife, Rose, answered the phone. Tony LiMandri's boy, from Chicago? Mother of God, he must come right over! Paulo was working late at the macaroni factory of which he was part owner, but he would be overjoyed to see the son of his old friend from the Conca D'Oro. The address was 87 Gravier Street.

He walked across Canal Street and over towards Gravier as slowly as possible, but all too soon he was there. 87 Gravier Street. He felt a little sick to his stomach.

He rang the bell of the three-story red-brick house that had once been a wealthy sugar-planter's mansion. The door opened and Rose Marchese stood there, wiping her hands on her apron and smiling broadly.

"Well, Michael LiMandri, come in! Welcome to this house!" She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the forehead. She was of medium height, rather thin, with wispy gray hair. She had a quiet, care-worn face and alert black eyes.

She led the way upstairs, and when they were seated in the old-fashioned parlor she called out, "Pieta! Bring some Chianti and cookies." Then from the kitchen came Pieta Marchese, nineteen, brown-haired, black-eyed, demure, and shaped like a young goddess. She was carrying a decanter of red wine and a plate of home-made cookies. Mike drew a deep breath. Nothing had prepared him for this. He returned polite answers to Mamma Marchese and tried to keep from staring at the quiet, beautiful girl. She kept filling his glass and soon the wine had loosened his tongue, and he was laughing with Mamma Marchese and thoroughly enjoying himself.

Only when Paulo Marchese came home was Mike reminded of his errand in New Orleans.

Paulo Marchese was a tall, ascetic-looking man with very high cheek-bones and thinning gray-black hair. His gray eyes and thin, tight lips reminded one of a monk or perhaps an unfrocked priest. He always dressed in a dignified black suit and vest and wore a clean, starched white shirt without a tie. He carried a gun in a shoulder-holster and was a very good shot.

He came up the back stairs quietly and stood unobserved in the kitchen for a few minutes, looking at Mike through the little glass window in the kitchen door. There was something vaguely recognizable in the young man's face, but he didn't like the sharp clothes and the slicked-back, too-long hair. When Pieta came into the kitchen, he said: "Who is this? A new boy-friend?" And she blushed and said no, Papa, it is Mike LiMandri from Chicago, the son of your old friend Tony LiMandri, of whom you often speak. Looking carefully at Mike's face, Paulo knew that it was true, but even so he did not immediately go in. He knew the way of the foe. But no, he was too fearful. In spite of the sharp clothes, this boy had a good face, the face of the old friend who had been best man at his wedding in the village of Chiusi Sclafani twenty-eight years ago. It was unthinkable that he should be a Green One. He walked in and embraced Mike, and in the embrace the practiced fingers determined that the young man had no shoulder-holster, no gun. Paulo relaxed then, and drank Chianti, and laughed, and asked the same questions Mamma Marchese had asked and got the same answers.

5.

Mike walked uncertainly back through the moonlight to the Hotel Napoleon. All he could think about was the quiet girl.

When he saw Momo on Friday, the big man greeted him jovially. "Hey Mike, how you doin', *paisan?*"

"Doing swell, Mr. Masseria. I met the family. It's going good, but it'll take a little time." Oh, it was too goddam big, but he couldn't tell Momo that.

"Good! Have some shrimp." Momo pushed a plate of fried prawns toward him. "You want a drink?"

"No, thanks, I better not drink. I got a job, you know." He really would have liked a drink.

Momo laughed expansively. "You telling me? Christ, you're doin' better'n I figured. Maybe you get a crack at that daughter, that Pieta. A nice hunk of stuff there, Mike." He giggled and made an obscene gesture.

The sight of the fat man sitting there picking bits of shrimp shell out of his teeth with his little finger and talking dirty about the shy Pieta

nauseated Mike for some reason. He got up to go.

"Next Friday, same time."

"Sure, Mr. Masseria."

It was Pieta who drew Mike into the bosom of the Marchese family. She had a young man by the name of Rocco DiNapoli who called on her regularly and with whom she sometimes went to the severely-chaperoned socials at the Sons of Italy or the Garibaldi Democratic Club. His parents ran a small restaurant on Dryades Street patronized by working men, and he was very much in love with Pieta. But she did not love him, at least not very much. And because Mike was like their own son, the Marcheses relaxed the customary stern chaperonage and let Pieta go to the movies and on walks through the park and even down Bourbon Street to hear the jazz with him. Soon the disgruntled Rocco was rationed to one date every two weeks.

One evening as Mike and Pieta sat in a darkened theatre, he felt a small, warm hand slide into his, and all during the picture he held the hand tightly, the soft pressure of his fingers rewarded by the soft answering pressure of hers, and finally her head was on his shoulder and she drew his hand to her mouth and pressed the back of it against her lips, and then placed it confidently and gently on her full, round breast. Mike's heart pounded and he felt a sudden surge of tenderness and passion for her, and it was something new, the tenderness. Kid stuff, he told himself angrily, holding hands and feeling a girl up in a goddam movie. But he touched her cheek, and there were tears on it. When they came out of the theatre, she grasped his arm tightly and without saying anything they went to a park they knew and there on a bench beneath a palm tree they pressed their young mouths together and she told him shyly that she had never really been in love before but that she was in love with him.

Mike had had lots of girls, but never yet had he said "I love you." Now, to his own surprise, he heard himself saying it. And meaning it.

They were both shaken. They walked home in silence.

Now during the days and weeks that followed, while Mike was taking Pieta to the movies, to dances, to little smoke-filled jazz joints, and to the park; while he was falling unwillingly in love with her; while the Marcheses noted with beaming approval the obvious progress of the romance—all this time Mike was carefully watching Paulo and trying to figure out where, when, and how to carry out the contract that had now become a huge burning stone that he must carry up the hill of each day. Each Friday he reported to Momo Masseria, haunted with fear that Momo would discover that he was really in love with Pieta, and that Paulo would find out that he knew Momo.

Momo knew at once that Mike was going out with Pieta. In fact, he owned one of the jazz joints they liked. On one occasion a bottle of champagne appeared at their table with a card: "Compliments of the Management." And Mike knew that Momo knew.

One Friday when Mike was paying his weekly visit to the Cafe Lafitte, Momo winked slyly. "Hear you're making time with that Marchese broad."

"I take her out once in awhile." How much did Momo know?

"What I hear is you're lovin' her up in the park."

He forced a laugh. "You know a better place?"

"Hell, yes. So do you. But listen, don't jump her too soon. Paulo might get wise. If you get hotted up too bad, take it out on one of my girls. I got a red-head that's really—"

"Yeah, you told me. I don't like red-heads."

"You got it taped real good so far, Mike, but don't forget why you're here."

"How the hell can I forget?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Guy gets hotted up, he's liable to forget anything."

"I'm not forgetting, Mr. Masseria." (God, if only he *could*.)

"Well, take your time, but it's been almost three months already. I heard from Johnny. He's askin' about you."

It was funny; you never quite knew just how it happened. You were a crazy kid on the streets; you threw in with them because they had power and the money was big and easy; you were a wheelman for awhile, chauffer for Johnny Borrio and like that, and before you knew it you were in deep—too deep to ever get out.

Detaching a portion of his mind to a study of Paulo's daily routine, he noted that the entire route to the macaroni factory was by public transportation. At the factory, Paulo stepped directly from the busy street into a large room jammed with the desks of some thirty employees. His own desk was set in the center of this room. He brought his lunch from home and ate it at the desk. The factory itself was full of employees. And Paulo had overlooked nothing; even when he went to the Men's Room he took precautions. A foreman searched the lavatory before Paulo went in and stood guard until he came out, allowing no one else to enter. Even at lodge meetings and at Mass he sat in the center of the crowd. Only at home was he in the least vulnerable, and even there it would take careful planning to be alone with him and in a position to strike so as to make it appear that the deed had been done by another.

6.

One Saturday afternoon, as Mike was stretched across the bed in his room at the Hotel Napoleon,

his hands over his eyes and his nerves raw, there was a light knock on the door. When he opened it there was Pieta, a blue and yellow *tignon* about her brown hair.

"Hello, Mike. I'm on my way to Confession. I thought—."

He closed the door and drew her to him. She yielded quietly and he held her tight; her lips were moist and soft and eager.

She leaned back from him. "I thought you might—."

He drew her roughly down beside him on the bed and clung to her, shivering. She pulled away and sat up, straightening her *tignon* and smoothing her dress.

"I thought you might want to come to Confession, too."

How many years had it been since he had gone into the musty old box at the Church of St. Philip Benizi to ask old Father Verochi to bless him, for he had sinned? Seven? Eight? But he still remembered the small sins confessed, and the absolution, and oh, the blessed peace, the sense of life made whole again! Could he now, even now, go into a Confessional box and come forth clean, clean, clean? Was it too late?

No, it was never too late—between the stirrup and the ground, between the bridge and the water, there is salvation. He knew that he could pour out before the priest the whole crimson tide of his sins, that he could confess his errand of murder, and that he would be forgiven. And he knew the priest's lips would be sealed. Could he come forth from the box with his life restored, and marry Pieta, and settle down to an honest, clean life somewhere, as his father had done and as Paulo had done? Would *they,* perhaps, let him go?

He was filled with a great despair. They would never let him go. They never let anybody go.

He and Pieta walked together to the Cathedral through the old streets with the French names and the flower and coffee smell. In Jackson Square the jasmine and bouganvillea were in bloom in a riot of color; their perfume was so sweet as to be almost unendurable. On the benches of the Square itself, old men played checkers in the warm sunshine, and children romped between the flowerbeds. Young people sat with their arms around each other, kissing and laughing in their delight with themselves. In the Cathedral itself the organist was playing, and the Square with its old men, children, lovers, and flowers was filled with the swelling, rolling, surging music of Bach.

They entered the Cathedral hand in hand, anointed themselves with holy water, and walked down past the Stations of the Cross and the side chapels to the row of Confessional boxes to the right of the high altar. In one of the chapels, two priests were chanting the Gradual of the Second Mass, and the words flowed over them:

> "Our soul, like a sparrow, hath been snatched forth from the snare of the huntsman: broken is the snare—and we, we are set free."

Pieta squeezed his hand and whispered: "The two down there." At the end of the line of boxes there were two with open doors. An old woman had just come out of one. What sins does an old woman confess, Mike wondered?

Pieta left him and entered the box at the end of the line. He stood uncertainly at the door of the box the old woman had left. The sweat ran down his face and under his shirt-collar; he clenched and unclenched his hands, grinding his finger-nails into the damp palms until the blood seeped through the welts. Finally he turned away and sat down at the end of a pew to wait for Pieta. He shuddered convulsively. He could not confess.

As he sat there, the priest who had heard the old woman's confession came out of the box and walked down the aisle past him. For an instant they looked into each other's eyes. The priest was old and gray-haired with faded blue eyes, and in the depths of those eyes was an ineffable weariness.

The first person outside of the Marchese family to know of Mike's engagement to Pieta was Momo Masseria. Even before the announcement appeared in the Italian-language paper, there was a phone call to the Amalfi. Nick Miceli answered. "Go over to the bar," he told Mike. "Mr. Masseria wants to see you."

Momo was sitting with his feet on the desk, eating shrimp as usual. There were two other men in the office. They were big and young and tough-looking. As Mike entered, one of them closed the door after him and stood with his back against it.

"Have some shrimp, Mike." Momo pushed the plate towards him.

"No, thanks, Mr. Masseria."

"Bottle of beer, maybe?"

He shook his head. "Thanks just the same."

Momo was silent for a moment, working a toothpick around in his cavernous mouth. One of the young men had on a short-sleeved, flowered sport shirt that showed his muscular arms almost covered with thick, curly, black hair. He had a tattoo of a snake coiled to strike just above his left elbow. He roamed the office with a fly-swatter, smashing the flies with short, powerful slaps.

Mike felt queer. He just waited. Christ, how had he gotten into this box, anyway?

Finally Momo pushed the plate away and laid down the toothpick. The young man in the flowered sport-shirt stopped hunting the flies. The other young man, his shirt open at the throat, fanned himself with a copy of the afternoon paper.

Momo said pleasantly: "Well, Mike, I see you got the hit set. You're gonna hit him when he walks the bride up the aisle, right in front of the

goddam priest!"

The two young men snickered. Mike could only stand there with a tight smile on his face. The arrogance, the cockiness, were gone from that face now.

Momo took his feet off the desk and slammed them down on the floor. He was very fast for such a big man.

"That when you gonna hit him, *paisan?* Or ain't you gonna hit him at all? Big gun from Chi!" He spat contemptuously. "You're getting like mush, *paisan*. It shows in your kisser."

There was no use pretending. Mike said: "Well, I won't deny it, Mr. Masseria. I kind of fell for this girl and that makes things look a little different."

"You want out of the contract, that it?"

Mike's lips were dry. He ran his tongue over them nervously. "I just wish there wasn't no vendetta, Mr. Masseria. I wish Paulo didn't have to be hit."

"There is a vendetta! He has to be hit! And you gotta do it! You're a Siciliano; you know what it means if you don't!

"I know, but—." He wanted to bawl and say "Listen, fellahs, all I ever wanted to do was play center for the Sox."

"Why you got to marry this fluff? Why don't you just take her? You young punks make me sick? A broad is a broad! I got plenty girls, hot girls. Why don't you take one of them?"

"It's not that, Mr. Masseria. It's really—well, love or something." He was embarrassed; it sounded like such goddam nonsense. "It just happened. Just one of those things, I guess." He tried to smile, but nobody smiled back.

"Love!" Momo came around the desk and grabbed him by the shirt. "I tell you something else gonna 'just happen,' *paisan*. Another one of 'those things!' You gonna be lyin' in the Marchese's parlor in a goddam pine box if you don't hit Paulo by Sunday! I run out of patience with you, Michael! I give you till Sunday to make the hit. And you're gonna be tailed every second between now and then!"

There was no use arguing. Nothing was any use.

Momo sat down again, looking thoughtfully at a shrimp on a toothpick. *"Paisan,* I got to make you come to Jesus. Sorry, but it's the only way."

Mike made a break for the door. The man guarding it had a blackjack; he brought it down with a sickening crack. Mike reeled dizzily, grabbing for the desk. The man with the snake tattoo closed in and drove his fist into his stomach. The man with the blackjack raised it to strike.

"Not in the face!" yelled Momo. "Work over his gut, where it won't show!"

"Yeah, the groom gotta look pretty!" grunted the man with the blackjack. Mike swung at him but missed. The blackjack thudded against his kidney and red streaks of pain flashed along his thighs. He doubled over and sagged to the floor. They worked him over then, systematically, sadistically, with the blackjack; they began at the soles of his feet and ended with his neck. But he did not cry out. His whole body was a mass of pain. He groveled on the floor, groaning.

Finally, with a sigh, he slipped into the enveloping blackness.

7.

How long he was unconscious he could not tell. When he came to it was dark, and he could see the glow of a cigarette. Momo was sitting at the desk, alone, waiting for him.

When he moaned and stirred, the big man turned the desk lamp so that it shone like a spotlight on the twitching, beaten figure on the floor. Then he took a bottle of rum from a desk drawer, poured a water-tumbler a third full, and knelt beside him. Like a mother feeding a sick child, he raised his head gently with one fat hand and held the glass to his lips. There was a trickle of blood, almost dry now, running out of the corner of Mike's mouth.

"Here, get outside this. You'll feel better."

The rum flowed warmly down his throat and almost immediately he could feel the heat work along his veins and out to his numb hands and feet. When he tried to get up he was seized with nausea and retched violently. The pain in his body had given way to an enormous stiffness; he felt like a very old man. The balls of his feet throbbed with pain. From neck to toes he was a dark mass of purple welts and bruises, the flesh puffy and ugly but not broken.

He groaned and leaned weakly against the wall. Momo was solicitous. He wiped the blood from his lips with his own handkerchief. He helped him ease his tortured body into a chair. Then he poured him another drink.

Momo said: *"Paisan,* you know how much it hurts me to have to do this. I am a gentle man, and you are a Green One, a blood-brother. But it is better that you should suffer a little now than that we should have to hit you later."

The penance in this church was hard.

After an hour, he thought he could make it to the hotel. Momo called a cab for him. Nobody saw him pull himself painfully up the stairs to his room. He dropped face down on the bed. Every bone, muscle, and vein in his body throbbed with an aching that was almost unendurable.

Five days. He buried his head in the pillow and wept like a baby.

He never went back to the Amalfi. For a night and a day and another night he stayed in bed,

careful not to let anyone see his bruised body. He called Pieta and told her he was not feeling well and thought maybe he had a touch of the flu. She and Mama Marchese came to his room with soup and wine and garlic bread and made him take aspirin. He refused to let them call a doctor.

When he got up on Wednesday morning he was still stiff, but he felt much better. He thought of killing Momo and then dying heroically in place of Paulo. It would be pleasant to kill Momo, but meaningless, because the Green Ones would kill Paulo anyway. And if he killed Momo, they might not stop with killing him; retribution might be extended to others in the LiMandri and Marchese families. It was their way.

He felt sorry for himself and for Paulo and for Pieta and for all the Marcheses, and even for Momo. The vendetta was an absurd, grisly ballet, in which each must dance the part written for him.

The music played, and the dancers danced.

Friday came. One more day! He carried the guns all the time now, but he did not know whether he would have the nerve to use them. No opportunity had yet come to be alone with Paulo.

On Friday night, he and Pieta went to the movies. In the dark, she could feel him trembling beside her. She took his hand and laid it on her breast. She put her head on his shoulder. "My poor Mike," she whispered. "You still aren't well. Shall we go?"

"Yes," he said. Her head touched the shoulder-holster, but she did not know what it was. They went out. He couldn't stop the shaking. They went to the little park and sat on their favorite bench beneath the rustling palm. He kissed her more hungrily than ever before. His mouth was demanding on her lips, her cheeks, her neck.

"No, my darling," she whispered. "We must wait!"

She did not understand. She laughed and struggled with him. "Oh Mike, what a honeymoon we'll have!"

A half-stifled sob escaped from his throat. He released her. She wiped his eyes with her handkerchief as if he were a naughty small boy. "My impatient bridegroom," she said. "Come now, no more of this. Take me home."

They had had some pictures taken after the engagement was announced—formal proud, stiff, old-fashioned photographs; the kind you see on the pianos or the marbletopped tables in the dim green parlors with the horsehair sofas. The photographer had told them to come to his studio on Poydras Street on Saturday morning at 10:30 to see the proofs and select the ones they wanted made up. But the dressmaker who had been commissioned to make Pieta's wedding gown, a Mrs. Altieri who lived on Perdido Street, phoned at a quarter to ten to ask Pieta to come for a fitting. Paulo overheard the conversation. "Go to Mrs. Altieri," he called to Pieta. "I will go with Mike to look at the proofs."

Mike hadn't slept all night. His nerves were raw; his hands and feet trembled like those of an old drunk. He had a pint; he slugged down a third of it now and the liquor hit his empty stomach like a clenched fist, sending the warm blood surging out to the quivering nerve-ends. The trembling stopped and he was able to dress and shave. He strapped on the shoulder-holster with the Colt under his shirt and dropped the smaller gun into his jacket pocket. He was to meet Pieta at 10:15 at the corner of Gravier and Dryades. He knocked back another slug of whiskey and went out.

To his surprise, Paulo was waiting with Pieta. She explained about the dressmaker. "So I'll leave you at Perdido Street," she said, "and you and Papa go to the photographers. Be sure and pick the best ones."

He was going to be alone with Paulo.

The three of them walked down Dryades Street. Out of the corner of his eye Mike saw the small, dark man who had been lounging across the street from the Hotel Napoleon ever since the day of the beating in Momo's office.

Mike walked on the outside and tried to keep his mouth shut so they would not smell the liquor. Paulo was in a jovial mood. He laughed and made jokes and called out a hearty 'buen' jorno' to friends. Pieta was happy too, but she was worried about Mike. His eyes were red. He was thin and pale and he had cut himself shaving but did not realize it. His fingers twitched and he had almost nothing to say; she thought she smelled liquor on his breath. The strain of waiting is too much, she thought. I want to be a pure bride, I want to wait.

At Perdido Street they paused. Pieta would leave them here. "Make a good fit," admonished Paulo gaily. "Tell Mrs. Altieri we pay a little more for a first-class fit."

"Oh, Papa, she knows what she's doing. She's the best dressmaker in town." She smiled and squeezed Mike's arm.

Mike was drunk, but they did not know it. He laughed and bent to kiss her but she moved away from him, smelling the liquor strongly now. She began to worry. She stood and watched them go off down Dryades Street. She shivered slightly.

Nonsense, she told herself. She was feeling the strain, too. She turned down Perdido.

The music played, and the dancers danced.

8.

The photographer's studio was on the second floor of a three-story walk-up building on Poydras Street. A pasticceria, a dry-goods store, and a drug-

store occupied the first floor. On the second were the offices of lawyers, notary publics, and public accountants. Bonelli Brothers, Photographers, had the entire third floor. A broad flight of stairs connected the two top floors with the street level. Opposite the stairs was a narrow flight of steps that led down through a screen door to an alley. On Saturday morning all the second floor offices were closed, and only people who had some business with Bonelli Brothers were using the stairs at all.

Mike took it all in. There was a fever in his brain, but that brain was painfully sharp and clear. Across the street, the small dark man who had followed them bought a newspaper, drank a coke, and waited.

The proofs were good. Paulo chuckled appreciatively. "There's a good one, Mike. Look at me. I'm ten years younger."

Mike hardly saw the pictures. Only the face of Pieta swam up through the fever in his head.

Paulo selected the proofs they wanted made up. "A half dozen of each, I think. How many for Chicago, Mike? Three of each? Yes, that will be enough. When will they be ready, friend Rick?"

"A week from today," said Rick Bonelli. The young guy looks sick, he thought to himself. Or drunk.

"Good! Good! Arrivederci, Rick."

"So long, Mr. Marchese."

It had been years since any man had walked behind Paulo Marchese. This precaution had become as natural to him as breathing. It was something he learned, and never forgot.

But now, his mind was full of pictures and wedding plans; this was a big thing for him. He was happy with himself, with all things, and he reached the stairs leading down to Poydras Street a small second ahead of Mike.

Mike stopped suddenly and Paulo, his foot on the top step, his hand resting lightly on the rail, was a full stride ahead of him. He took no notice of this, even as he heard his prospective son-in-law hesitate, and he half-turned, a smile on his face.

"Come on, Mike, we may run into Pieta—"

The little bull-dog barked, two soft, apologetic barks; and the bullets thudded into Paulo Marchese's brain.

But before he plunged down the long flight of stairs and rolled out onto the sidewalk, there was a look of amazed, sorrowful recognition in his eyes. He knew.

The blood-foe had found him, at last.

The body of Paulo Marchese had only begun to fall when Mike flung the little gun down the narrow back stairs that led to the alley. He then pulled the big Colt from the holster, and sent four bullets screaming down the deserted alley. He heard their echo and thud as they hit.

The handkerchief with which he had held the murder gun was back in his pocket, and he was standing there, waiting. The Colt was in his hand when Rick Bonelli bounded out of his studio, only to reel back against the wall as he saw Mike with the big, smoking .45 in his hand.

There was a moment of absolute silence after the sound of the shots. The body of Paulo Marchese was crumpled in the middle of the sidewalk at the foot of the stairs, and people came running from all directions. They could do nothing.

Mike sat weakly on the top step and buried his head in his hands. For one awful second he thought of turning the Colt on himself. Below him there was a sea of white, accusing faces. They wavered in the strong morning sunshine. A siren screamed. Two policemen shouldered their way through the crowd. With drawn guns they came cautiously up the stairs and disarmed Mike.

Across the street, the short, dark man put down his coke bottle, stepped into a drugstore, and called the Cafe Lafitte. He spoke to Momo Masseria. It was a short conversation.

"That traveling salesman from up north just showed his samples," the short, dark man said. "I think it's a sale."

Momo giggled. He always giggled when he was pleased.

10.

Everything went just as Momo had planned. Everything usually did.

In only one small thing was he mistaken. Mike was released and the pack went baying after Adamo Vincent, but Mike was no hero to the Marcheses. They knew.

Pieta? After two weeks at the Touro Hospital, she was considered better. They felt she was improved enough to go to the bathroom by herself.

That was a mistake.

One Saturday morning she went to the bathroom and jumped out the window. She was holding a rosary in her hand. It was three floors to the street.

It was the day on which she was to have married Mike.

She didn't die, even if it was three floors to the street. She had to spend the rest of her life in a wheel-chair. But Rocco DiNapoli married her anyway, and they took over the little restaurant from Rocco's parents.

They had no children, but in time they were not unhappy.

Mike went back to Chicago. He was a big man there now. They congratulated him and threw a midnight supper for him at Colosimo's. It was really something.

They were planning to set him up in his own strip in Calumet City, but they gave that up when he got drunk during the celebration. That's when he tried to kill Johnny Borrio. Considering the

strain and everything, they were willing to overlook that.

But he took a shot at Johnny Borrio the next time he got drunk. He took a shot at Johnny every time he got drunk, and he was hardly ever sober after that supper party.

They knew then that he'd had it.

He'd never make a triggerman—too warm-blooded. He was human. He had feelings. Regretfully, they packed him out to Vegas.

They gave him a job as a shill, and they saw that he stayed put. They watched him very carefully.

He tried to make it to New Orleans once or twice. He almost made it each time, but each time they caught him in time and brought him back.

At that, it was the best job he could have had. He got a hundred a week, a percentage of the play, and all he could drink.

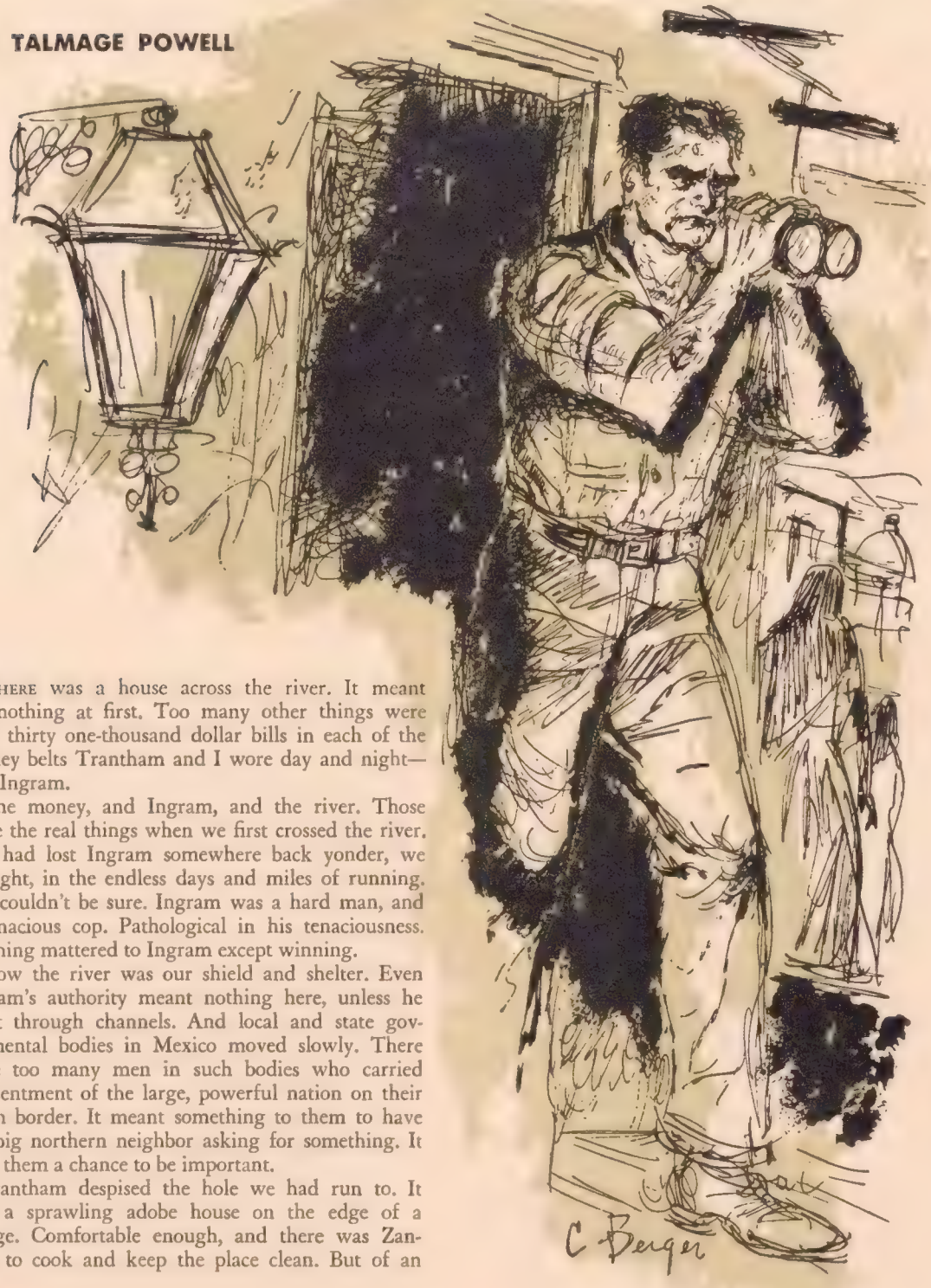
BY POPULAR DEMAND

The June issue of MANHUNT, on sale March 25, will be in the handy POCKET-SIZE. Don't miss it. Be sure to ask your newsdealer to reserve your copy today.

They were sweating things out in the little Mexican town, and nothing could make them leave their hideout. Nothing except

the dame across the river

by TALMAGE POWELL



THERE was a house across the river. It meant nothing at first. Too many other things were real, thirty one-thousand dollar bills in each of the money belts Trantham and I wore day and night—and Ingram.

The money, and Ingram, and the river. Those were the real things when we first crossed the river. We had lost Ingram somewhere back yonder, we thought, in the endless days and miles of running. We couldn't be sure. Ingram was a hard man, and a tenacious cop. Pathological in his tenaciousness. Nothing mattered to Ingram except winning.

Now the river was our shield and shelter. Even Ingram's authority meant nothing here, unless he went through channels. And local and state governmental bodies in Mexico moved slowly. There were too many men in such bodies who carried a resentment of the large, powerful nation on their north border. It meant something to them to have the big northern neighbor asking for something. It gave them a chance to be important.

Trantham despised the hole we had run to. It was a sprawling adobe house on the edge of a village. Comfortable enough, and there was Zangara to cook and keep the place clean. But of an

evening, the faint and only breeze of the day would carry the smells of the village to us. Sweat and sour cooking and refuse both human and animal.

Trantham would sit in the patio and curse. He made a serious occupation of it, cursing the heat and mosquitoes, and mesquite, and the resaca land itself. He hated it all. He was tired, bitter, and lonely.

I was sick of the place myself, and just as filled up with Trantham and his cursing. We were here because he'd left a set of fingerprints when we'd stole the money. He'd been fingerprinted before. Ingram had almost got us at the very start.

Now that we were here, I thought we should make the best of it. What else could be done? In a few days we'd know for certain whether or not we'd shaken Ingram. If he'd lost us, we could re-enter somewhere in the Big Bend country. From there, I hoped Trantham would go to Vegas and spend his money. He talked enough of the lights and activity and of touching a woman again. With only stolid Indian faces in the village, Trantham tortured himself with the thought of a clean face and smooth slender figure.

For myself, I liked the idea of Oregon and the purchase of a business. I had made mine. I wore it next to the skin in the heavy belt. I was finished with that sort of thing—if Ingram had lost us and if we survived the heat and filth and screaming boredom on this side of the river.

Nobody in the village spoke much English. A few words. Even their Spanish was a bastard language of old Castillian and Indian words and corrupted American words that had lost their meaning and pronunciation in crossing the dividing line between the two countries.

Had there been a fluent linguist in the village it would have done us no good. They were friendly at first. But that didn't last long. Trantham's contempt for them took care of that. He despised them all, even more than he despised their land. And they sensed it. I could feel their sensing of it. I saw it in their eyes and silence, and their hatred reached out to us like a dark and tangible thing. A lurking, old hatred. It was spawned in the days of the Spanish conquistadors—and Trantham had fanned it and revitalized it with his curses and kicks and raw unconcealed contempt.

Soon, except for Zangara, we were quite alone, as isolated as we might have been on an island in the middle of the sea. The village was there, and we were here, and they had marked us taboo.

They stood and watched silently as we came into the village to buy food. They sold us rotten eggs and meat crawling with maggots. Or they told us by gestures that they had no meat, and we lived on grubby vegetables for two or three days at a time, until we sent Zangara into the village with enough money to bribe away a scrawny chicken or cut of mutton.

Zangara took our money and never returned change, though I suspected he was buying in the village at current prices. He was a tall, thin man of undeterminate age. His skin was like dark brown leather stretched over his bones. He had a great hawk-beak nose and pointed chin and crags of bone over his glistening black eyes. His coarse black hair grew low on his round, sloping forehead.

"Mucho dinero, senor," he would say when I tried to find out how much an item had cost. Much money. All the money he had carried into the village.

Trantham would curse him until the curses ended in a choked gasp. And Zangara would look at him with his face a blank, brown skull. Trantham would wheel and stalk off, aching to break Zangara's chicken-thin neck in his two heavy hands. But he never laid a finger on Zangara. We needed the man. Without him, we might buy nothing from the village. He was our final contact with the world. With something beyond this sun-baked adobe house and a pair of money belts holding thirty thousand dollars apiece.

As if our isolation were not bad enough, Trantham and I began to keep separated from each other. I was ready to gag on his raving. The mere sound of his voice became even more hateful than the endless heat and humidity. And my efforts to accept things calmly infuriated him.

We never permitted the tension to reach the breaking point. Each realized how dependent he was on the other. Each heard in the silence of the nights the throb, throb of hatred from the village and the rustling shadow of Ingram across the river.

By unspoken agreement Trantham and I avoided each other. If he were in the patio, I remained on the front porch reading or playing solitaire—and I even invented two new solitaire games of my own—or looking through the rusty screening at the river or mesquite.

And all the while this house stood across the river.

It was set apart from the small town over there as our house was set apart. It was frame, and looked very small from this distance. Brown, as if it needed paint and repairs. A house that had stood empty for some time, sleeping in the shadow of the cottonwood tree growing at the corner of the yard.

Then one day Trantham was very quiet. He was on the front porch and I was inside, reading. The very lack of activity on his part finally penetrated my consciousness. He never sat still or was silent for very long. Yet it seemed now a long time since I had heard any sign of him.

I threw aside the six-months-old, dog-eared magazine and walked to the front door.

The heat was a crawling, sticky thing, clouding the mind and souring the body. Yet Trantham was standing in the full glare of the sun, in the

front yard.

He was looking at the house across the river.

There was movement at the house, the remote figure of a girl going inside. She was back out in a few seconds, lifting something to her eyes. A brief flash of light caught on the binoculars. She had them trained on Trantham.

I looked at him. His shirt was black with sweat, his hair around his balding crown stuck to his skull with more sweat. He was a big, tall bruiser with powerful rounded shoulders, a heavy chest and corded neck.

He stood unmindful of the sun that he had been cursing this morning. He waved.

I looked across the river.

The girl waved back.

Now it was Trantham who moved. He brushed past me like a bull elephant, giving no indication he knew I was there.

I heard him rummaging violently in his room. Then he came out carrying a pair of binoculars.

I watched him as he raised the glasses and looked at the girl. I saw him suck in his breath, and I saw a tremor cross his shoulders.

I looked toward the girl myself. But without glasses she was too distant from me for her beauty to do to me what it had done to Trantham.

I watched them a few moments longer as they waved and gestured toward each other; and then I went in my room and slammed the door.

Trantham was in much better spirits at supper. Several times he chuckled to himself as we munched on frijoles and tortillas.

For him, the boredom had been shattered today.

They played the game three days. Lurking in the house, the heat crawling through all my cells and veins, I hated Trantham for the first time. I'd never liked him, but this was something different.

I wondered how I could get the binoculars from him. I knew he wouldn't give them up, and if I challenged him for them there'd be only one result. We were that much on edge.

At lunch the fourth day, Zangara had disappeared. I stood in the kitchen and shouted his name three or four times.

From the doorway, Trantham said quietly, "He's gone over the river."

I spun around. "What for?"

Trantham grinned. His face was big and heavy and oily. "He went across the river with a few bucks. That town over there is more Mex than American. He can find out."

"You damned fool!"

His grin turned to a chuckle. "She's a real looker, a real doll. Lonely and bored over there, I'm betting."

"With Ingram in the house maybe."

"Maybe. I'll know tonight. Zangara will find out for sure. Those Mex boogers over there will know everything. They'll talk to Zangara. He'll get it all."

I kicked the door closed behind him when he left the room.

I woke from a fitful sleep that night to hear voices. Trantham's and Zangara's.

"Good," Trantham said.

"Lone woman," Zangara said. "She work. Drugstore. In the town. No strange white man come to town."

"Fine," Trantham said.

I swung my feet off my lumpy rope and frame bed and stood up in the darkness. My body was slimy with sweat. The nights never brought much relief from the heat, only the heavy muck smell of the resaca land.

I heard Trantham leave the next room. I started after him.

He was already at the far side of the front yard when I reached the door. I stood with the pulse in my solar plexus beating hard against the heat and watched his heavy shadow blend into the mesquite.

I turned. Zangara's black bead eyes jumped at me in the yellow lamplight. I cursed him for the first time. "Get the hell out of here!"

"Si, senor," he said, bowing his way out backward.

I went in my bedroom and sat on the rough-hewn plank that framed the bed. I lighted a cigarette, a dry, hot, strong Mexican cigarette, and tried to get my mind off of it.

The rotten luck, having it happen to Trantham. A lonely girl. A flirtation across the river. Soon now he would be hearing a woman's voice, low and laughing.

I was out early the next morning with the binoculars in my hand. The girl was outside, walking across the yard. I got my first close up of her. A very beautiful Mexican girl. Black, waving hair, black, flashing eyes, full red lips. Full rich figure. Hips swinging as she walked up on the porch of the house across the river.

She reached out a hand. A man stepped from the house and took it.

The man was not Trantham, and my flesh was icy under its outer heat and sweat.

The man was Zangara.

The girl laid her head on his shoulder, looked up into his skull face and smiled. And they walked into the house together.

This morning I found Trantham.

He had washed up on the river bank. His throat had been cut. His money belt was gone.

I buried him under some rocks. Then I came back to the house.

Like Trantham, I am carrying thirty thousand dollars.

Zangara and the river are before me.

The village is behind me. I can feel the hatred and silence of it.

Trantham . . . the stupid, utter fool.

ONE MORE CLUE

A John J. Malone Story

by CRAIG RICE

THE GIRL was very beautiful. She sat across the desk from John J. Malone and dabbed at her eyes with a silly-looking lace handkerchief. "I don't care what the police say," she told him. "Alvin didn't commit suicide. He didn't have any reason to commit suicide."

The little lawyer leaned back in his chair and regarded her benignly. "Suppose you start from the beginning, Miss Connell, and tell me all about it."

The girl brushed long black hair away from her face, hair as black, Malone thought, as the inside of a coal-cellar. But with attractions no coal-cellar had ever had for him before, he added silently. She was dressed in a light tan suit, a plain white blouse and a tiny tan hat, and Malone was sure that the outfit would never look quite so perfect on anyone else, ever. The man who'd come with her, Malone thought, didn't seem to be her type.

"Now, now," the man said. Malone glared at him. He glared back. "As Miss Connell's close friend," he said, "I advised her not to come here. I fail to see how a lawyer can do any good at all—"

"But he's John J. Malone," the girl said. "Really, Casper, we argued this through—" She looked at Malone and seemed ready to begin sniffling again.

"Your name is Helen Connell," Malone prompted

Breck had been alone when he died, so it couldn't have been murder. "It's murder," Malone said.

her, "and you were born on—"

"July fourth, nineteen-thirty-five," she said, and stopped, and almost smiled.

"And my name is Casper Jorgenson," the man said, "and I was born on December eighth, nineteen-twenty-four, and I fail to see what any of this has to do with Alvin and what's—what's happened."

"My question exactly," Malone said smoothly. "What's happened?"

"It's all so horrible," the girl said. "Alvin couldn't possibly have killed himself. He had everything to live for. He and I were—" She stopped again and dabbed at her eyes. Casper Jorgenson and Malone simultaneously reached for handkerchiefs; Helen Connell took Malone's, said: "Thank you," without looking up, and began to cry in earnest.

"Here, here," Malone said helplessly. "Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you're all wet. And if you cry, you can't tell me what happened so I can help you. This Alvin was your fiancé?"

She looked up. "How did you know?" she said, and there was wonder in her voice.

Malone reflected that it would be nice if someone else—say, Von Flanagan, or even Casper Jorgenson—would be so easily impressed by his marvelous deductive powers. Aloud, he only said: "See? I *can* help you, if you'll only tell me what happened."

"Helen, I seriously advise against this," Casper Jorgenson said. "The police know their job. If they say—"

"But he couldn't have—killed himself," the girl said. "Malone, listen. Last night, I was going to meet Alvin at his apartment. Alvin Breck. He had work to do, and I was supposed to pick him up at ten-thirty; we were going out to a movie. He—when I got there, Malone, he was dead. And now the police say he committed suicide."

"What makes them think that?" Malone said after a second.

"Just because the gas was turned on, and all the windows were closed and locked, and he was all alone in the room, the police say he—killed himself. Malone, he always worked with the windows and door shut and locked. He said fresh air was a soporific. Malone, he couldn't have killed himself."

The little lawyer thought of several possible answers, and selected one with care. "The police usually know what they're doing."

"But Alvin—he and I were engaged. We were going to be married. Everything was so wonderful."

Helen Connell had a point, Malone reflected. He couldn't imagine someone engaged to this girl committing suicide. "Maybe he had money problems," he suggested after a second.

"Everything was going so well," the girl said mournfully. "He had a new assignment, and it looked as if he was going to start making real money. Malone, he wouldn't have any money problems."

"Assignment?" Malone said.

"He was a writer. He wrote about—about crimes, Malone. And now he's dead and somebody killed him, and they say it's suicide and they won't listen to me and . . ."

"Now, now," Malone said quickly. "Now, now. Remember I'm going to help you." He tried to look comforting and dependable. "You think that Alvin Breck was murdered," he said. "Who do you think murdered him?"

Helen Connell looked up with surprise written all over her lovely face. "Oh, Malone," she said, "how would I know?"

Half an hour later, Malone was seated in a booth at Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar. In the opposite seat of the same booth, Captain Daniel Von Flanagan scowled at a boilermaker, picked it up, drank half of it off, and said: "All I want to know is why you got me down here, Malone. What's your ulterior motive?"

"Just a friendly little chat," the lawyer said, brushing cigar ashes off his vest. "For old times' sake."

"And what," Von Flanagan said suspiciously, "would you want to chat about? Except the old lady who shot her husband last week, there hasn't even been a murder in Chicago in a month. And don't tell me you're defending the old lady. It's an open and shut case, Malone, and I won't have you coming in and messing it up for me. I . . ."

"All I know is what I read in the papers," Malone said disarmingly. "I don't even want to hear about your old lady. I mean the one who shot her husband." Malone took a sip of his own drink, waited a second, and said: "No murders? I'll bet there must have been a couple of interesting suicides, though."

"Nothing much," Von Flanagan said.

"Oh, I don't know," Malone said. "There was that writer, just yesterday. I must have read about it somewhere. Died in a gas-filled room, all the windows and the door locked from the inside."

"Nothing new about that," Von Flanagan said, "except maybe the pigeon, and we got an explanation for the pigeon."

"Pigeon?"

Von Flanagan looked up. "Malone, are you working on that?" he said. "That's a suicide, and let me tell you it's open and shut. I've got enough troubles without you making them any worse, mixing up nice simple suicides for me. Let me tell you . . ."

Malone listened patiently through a recital of Van Flanagan's troubles for some minutes. At last he said: "I sympathize with you. Believe me, I do. And who said I was working on the suicide? What would I want to do that for?"

"I wouldn't know," Von Flanagan said. "But I suspect the worst."

"You just have a nasty mind," Malone said. "I'm just interested. Isn't there some way of turning on the gas from outside a room? I mean, the police would naturally think of that first."

"Sure we did," Von Flanagan said, "and there isn't. You have to turn the handle on the oven, right there in the kitchen. Open and shut."

"What did the suicide note say?" Malone asked.

"No note."

"A writer, and he didn't leave a suicide note?"

Von Flanagan shrugged. "Why should he write one? He wasn't getting paid for it. He was one of those true-crime writers. Did a story on me once—good story, too. I gave him a lot of material."

"Very nice," Malone said. "You must show me the story some day. Didn't he have any motive for suicide?"

"You're asking a lot of questions, Malone," Von Flanagan said.

The little lawyer tried to look supremely innocent. "I'm just interested," he said. "I'm curious, that's all."

"Curiosity," said Von Flanagan oracularly, "killed the cat. But about motive: sure, he must have had a motive. Maybe he was losing on the horses."

"I didn't know he played the horses," Malone said.

"We found betting slips, racing forms, in his apartment."

"Oh." Malone waited a minute, and took another drink. "About that pigeon—" he said.

"The pigeon interests you, right, Malone?" Von Flanagan almost grinned. "This Breck, he had a friend who kept pigeons. Some of this other guy's pigeons were sick, so he gave Breck one pigeon to keep, kind of so that pigeon wouldn't get the disease."

"What was his name?" Malone said.

"The pigeon?"

"The man who owned the pigeons," Malone said wearily.

"What do you want to know for?" Von Flanagan said. "But after all, Malone, if you are working on this, what harm can you do me? It's an open and shut case. Casper Jorgenson—little guy with glasses. He keeps pigeons."

"Casper Jorgenson," Malone said thoughtfully. "Anybody else connected with this?"

Von Flanagan put down his empty glass. "Malone, the next time I trust your word—the next time you tell me you just want a friendly talk—"

"I'm just curious," the lawyer said defensively.

"Sure," Von Flanagan agreed. "You're just curious, and you're out to make my work harder for me than it is already. You haven't got sympathy for an old friend. You want to get everything all mixed up. Well, Malone, I'll tell you everything I know, because this time you've put your foot in it. This time you're not going to get anywhere. This case is all filed away. It's an open and shut—as open and shut as—"

"As the Black Dahlia murders," Malone contributed.

"Sure," Von Flanagan said. He blinked. "Now look here, Malone—"

"Just a little joke," Malone said. "A harmless little joke. That's all."

"Fine thing," Von Flanagan said. "Old friends stabbing you in the back . . ." He appeared to be thinking for a minute. Then he smiled. "But this time, Malone, you've put your foot in it. And I'm going to help you get yourself in dutch. Any information you want, you can have."

"How about other people involved?" Malone said. "So far, there's Casper Jorgenson, who keeps pigeons, and Alvin Breck."

"The suicide." Von Flanagan said with relish. "Suicide, and don't you forget I warned you. There's Breck's fiancee, a nice kid—her name's Helen Connell—and there's a nut. He was downstairs in the apartment building where this Breck lived when we got there, said he was going to see Breck, so we got his name and asked him a couple of questions. His name's Alfonso the Great."

"Alfonso the Great?"

"He's a magician," Von Flanagan said. "Good luck, Malone. And don't worry—when you get into trouble I'll be right there to put you into a nice, safe jail."

A little later, after a few more questions and a session with the Chicago telephone directory, Malone had a plan of action. Alvin Breck, the medical examiner had said, had died between eight-thirty and nine-thirty, and the gas had been turned on perhaps a little before eight. The first thing to do, Malone told himself, is to check alibis. He wondered about all those betting slips and racing forms. Perhaps he'd better go and see Max Hook before he did anything else; Max would be able to tell him about Alvin Breck, if Breck had been a big horse player.

But when he called Max Hook's number, the line was busy, and stayed busy for ten minutes. "Oh, well," Malone said. "There's always time for everything." He wondered briefly what he meant by that, and decided not to think about it. Instead, he flagged a cab outside his office building, and gave directions to the Bright Theater.

"No matinees today, Malone," the cabbie said.

"I know," the little lawyer told him. "I've got to see a man about a room."

"A room, Malone?" the cabbie said. "In the Bright Theater?"

"This is a magician," Malone told him, "and the room is a locked room."

There was silence for the rest of the ride. At the theater, Malone, thankful that he'd found time for a poker game a few nights before, took out a roll of bills, paid the cabbie, and went around to the stage entrance. An old, old man in a rusty blue suit

barred the door.

"You looking for somebody?" he said.

"Alfonso the Great," Malone said, feeling just a little silly.

"Around back," said the ancient man. "Third door on your left."

He stepped aside and Malone went through, into a long dingy corridor. Green paint was flaking from the walls, and one naked electric bulb hung in the center of the ceiling. He counted doors carefully, came to the third, and knocked.

A voice inside said: "Who's there? Who is there?"

It was a woman's voice. Malone said: "I'm looking for Alfonso the Great."

"Just a minute," the woman said. Malone stood outside the door and waited, and at last he heard a latch click, and the door opened. "Perhaps you are a reporter?" the woman said. Her accent sounded French to Malone, but it was hard to tell. It was hard, Malone realized, to think of anything while the woman stood in the doorway watching him.

She was, he imagined, well over six feet tall. She was built like a Greek wrestler, and her square face, topped by a froth of brass-blonde hair, stared down at him disapprovingly. "Well?" she said.

Perhaps, Malone thought, she had misunderstood him and this was the wrong dressing room. "I'm looking for Alfonso the Great," he said.

"So you say," the woman muttered. "You say nothing else? I am Madame. I am his wife. We are at work on a new effect. He has gone out to a lunch, to bring back lunch for us, and he will be back. You will come in and wait? Perhaps you are a reporter to write a story about Alfonso the Great?"

"I just want to ask him some questions," Malone said modestly. "My name is Malone."

"Ah," the woman said slowly. "Melon. Come in, then, Mr. Melon."

Malone said: "Malone," realized it wasn't going to do any good, and went through the doorway behind the enormous woman. He found himself in a tiny room which contained a large mirror on one wall, a shelf-like table set against the mirror, and three chairs. He sat down in one of the chairs and watched the enormous woman lower herself to another. "You know the other reporter who was here, perhaps?" the woman said, smiling at him horribly.

"The other reporter?"

"His name was—" The woman thought. "Alvin Breck. The police told my husband all about how Mr. Breck had committed suicide. That is the way you say it?"

"That," Malone said, "is the way you say it. You could say I'm a friend of his."

"He, too, was writing a story about Alfonso the Great."

Malone said: "Really?"

"Oh, yes," the woman said, and nodded heavily.

There was a silence that lasted for several seconds. Then the door opened and a small, mustached man came in carrying a steaming paper bag. The enormous woman managed to stand up in the dressing room. "Alfonso," she said, "this is Mr. Melon, who is a friend of Mr. Alvin Breck, and he is going to write a story about you."

Alfonso the Great put down the paper bag and turned to Malone. "Ah," he said. "I'm so happy to meet you." His accent was also clearly distinguishable, but he spoke English with a little more ease. "Perhaps you'd like a bite of lunch?" he said.

Malone said: "No, thanks. I only want to ask you a couple of questions."

Alfonso nodded and took the third chair. His wife began removing things from the paper bag: sandwiches, paper cups and utensils. She spread them on the shelf-like table. Alfonso said: "I was born in nineteen-twelve in Alsace-Lorraine. I come from a family of magicians. My greatest illusion, Walking Through A Wall, I conceived in nineteen-twenty-four, when I was but twelve years old. I . . ."

"I only want to ask a couple of questions," Malone said. "Walking through a wall?"

"It is the illusion that has made me famous," Alfonso said. "Perhaps you prefer my Appearance of Eagles?"

This didn't seem the time, Malone reflected, to admit that a) he wasn't going to write any articles about Alfonso, and b) he'd never seen the magician's act. He merely nodded. "The Walking Through A Wall illusion interests me, though," he said. "You could escape from a locked, sealed room that way, couldn't you? Just walk through a wall into the corridor."

Alfonso laughed as if Malone had said something hysterically funny. His wife joined in, shaking the room with great gasps of sound. Finally Alfonso got enough breath back to say: "Of course I could—if the wall were specially prepared."

"Well," Malone said, "the wall in Alvin Breck's apartment, for instance."

Afonso nodded. "I was in the apartment," he said. "Early this morning. Then I had to come back here; we are at work, my wife and I, on a new illusion."

"How about walking through that wall?" Malone said. "I mean the wall in Alvin Breck's apartment."

"You are joking," Alfonso said.

"Sure," Malone said. "I'm joking." He brushed cigar ashes off his vest and tried to think of some more questions. "How long did you know Alvin Breck?" he said.

"Only a few days," Alfonso said. "He was going to write a story about my illusions—as you are going to do."

Malone thought. Alvin Breck had been a true-crime writer. Why would he have bothered with a story about magic and magicians? Unless there had

been some crime involved . . .

Well, it never did any harm to ask, he told himself.

"He was going to write about them from the criminal point of view, of course," he said.

Alfonso stood up. "Get out, Mr. Melon."

"But—"

Alfonso said: "Get out," again and his enormous wife stood up.

"Leave us," she said. "Why do you pretend to be his friend?"

"I'm his friend," Malone said. "I only meant—"

"We know too well what you meant," she said. "It is all over now. Do not dig it up again."

She came toward him. Malone backed to the door and opened it. "Listen a minute," he said, and stepped out into the hall. "Listen, I—"

The door slammed shut behind him.

That, Malone thought, was a dirty shame. There'd been at least one more important question he'd wanted to ask. Well, there wasn't any time to lose if he was going to get everything done, and he still had to call Max Hook and talk to Helen Connell again, and then see a man about a pigeon.

He left the theater, saying a polite: "Goodbye," to the ancient man at the stage door, and found a drugstore phone nearby. He called Max Hook.

This time the line was free, and in a few seconds he was talking to the gangster. "What can I do for you, Malone?"

"I just wanted to ask you a question or two," Malone said. "Ever hear of Alvin Breck?"

"Breck?" Hook waited a minute. "Malone, what's this about?"

"I understand the guy played the horses quite a bit," Malone started.

Hook interrupted him. "*Played* the horses? Something happen to the guy?"

"He's dead," Malone told him. "Turned on the gas in his room last night."

The telephone was silent.

"You still there?" Malone said.

"I'm here," Max Hook said. "I was a little surprised, that's all. The guy owed me a couple of G's. I suppose it's not important now, but I didn't figure him to welch. He wasn't that kind."

"What can you tell me about him?" Malone said.

"I—" Hook paused. "Hold on a minute, will you, Malone?"

The little lawyer rested against the wall of the telephone booth. He could hear a whispered conversation in the background, between Hook and some voice he couldn't identify. After a minute the conversation stopped, and Hook came back to the receiver. But his tone had changed.

"You listen to me, Malone," he said. "We've been friends for a long time. I've done you a lot of favors, Malone. But that's all over. When you start in framing me for some murder you can't do anything about, Malone, we're through. I want to talk to you—alone. I'm sending my boys down . . ."

Malone thought fast. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, "but wait for an hour. I'm going down to my office. Tell your boys to come down there in an hour."

"Malone, I'm not ready for any fooling around. Trying to frame me, Malone—I don't like that."

When Max Hook didn't like something, Malone thought, the consequences were liable to be drastic. "Wait an hour," he said. "For old times' sake."

"You're a fine one to be talking about old times," the gangster said. "Listen, Malone, I want to see you. Up here. Alone."

"In an hour," Malone said. "I'll be in my office. Would I try to pull anything on you?"

"You tried to frame me . . ."

"I did no such thing," Malone said. "One hour."

He waited a second. Finally Max Hook said: "One hour, Malone. And you better have a good explanation. I don't like this at all, Malone, not at all."

You've got nothing on me, Malone thought as he hung up the receiver. Some fast thinking was called for, and he didn't have any facts to work with.

He only knew one thing for sure: Alvin Breck had *not* committed suicide.

Back in his office, he found a stack of messages. Maggie had gone out for a bite of lunch, she'd written, but there had been a lot of calls.

Malone leafed through the papers. Von Flanagan had called. And the telephone company (about the bill). Von Flanagan. Von Flanagan. Max Hook. Von Flanagan. Von Flanagan. Von Flanagan. Helen Connell. Von Flanagan.

This, Malone told himself, means trouble. If Von Flanagan wanted him so insistently, Von Flanagan wasn't happy. And if Von Flanagan was mad at him . . .

That's all I need, Malone thought. The police *and* Max Hook.

He wondered if perhaps finding a nice hole to hide in wouldn't be the smartest thing for him to do. After all, if the police were satisfied that Alvin Breck had committed suicide, who was he to argue with them?"

Even if he knew that Breck hadn't committed suicide at all . . .

Somebody was vitally interested in getting Malone off the case, he realized. The somebody who'd called Max Hook and told him that Malone was trying to frame him, Hook, for the murder. The somebody who had probably gotten Van Flanagan mad at him.

Malone wondered about Alfonso the Great. How he had managed to get into the Breck apartment that morning? Maybe Helen Connell had let him in, Malone thought. And he ought to call Helen Connell anyhow; she'd left her name, and maybe she had some news for him.

What he really ought to do, he told himself, was go home and start all over again. Maybe if he got some sleep and avoided his office for a few days things would brighten up. But he'd promised Max Hook that he'd meet Hook's man there in the office in an hour—and by that time he had to have the case sewed up. No other explanation was going to be good enough, Malone knew.

He put his head in his hands for a second and sighed. Then he straightened up, lit a fresh cigar, and picked up the phone.

Helen Connell, said: "Hello?"

"Miss Connell, this is John J. Malone."

"Oh . . . have you . . ."

"There's nothing definite yet," he said, feeling that things were a little too definite to suit him. "But I want to know if anyone was in the—your fiance's apartment this morning. Did you take anyone there?"

She hesitated a moment. Malone pictured the black hair, the wonderful face and figure, and almost felt resigned to going on with the job. At last she said: "Before I came to see you . . . the police were finished anyway, and I thought that—talking to them, perhaps I could see who had killed—killed Alvin. He'd given me his key . . ."

"Of course," Malone said. "Who was there in the room with you, this morning?"

"That magician," she said, "and Casper Jorgenson—he gave Alvin a pigeon, and the pigeon was in the apartment when—it happened, and so the pigeon was dead, too, and Casper was very mad about it. And—a man named Fingers, who said he worked for a friend of Alvin's. Malone, that was strange."

"What was strange?"

"He said . . . somebody called him and told him to be there. Somebody called his boss, I mean."

"Who's his boss?" Malone said, telling himself that the answer he knew was coming couldn't possibly come.

"A man named Hook," Helen Connell said. "Max Hook."

After a few seconds, Malone hung up very carefully. Strange, he thought, was not the word for this case. Not only did he have the police on his neck, and Max Hook on his neck, but he had a locked-room murder to deal with.

And a magician, he told himself savagely. A magician whose specialty is walking through walls. That, Malone thought, would come in handy for locked rooms.

Von Flanagan, Max Hook, Alfonso the Great, and a locked room. And, of course, a pigeon. Malone wished that he could stop thinking that the case had given him the bird. He got up and found a bottle of rye in the Emergency drawer of the filing cabinet, and he poured himself a long drink.

How would anybody get in and out of a locked, sealed room to turn on an oven? And why would Alvin Breck—who had everything to live for—let someone do it? Maybe the someone was a person Breck had trusted, Malone thought. But that would leave him with only Helen Connell as a suspect, as far as he knew—or maybe Casper Jorgenson, and wouldn't the bird-fancier have taken his pigeon out before turning on the gas?

The pigeon reminded him that he still had calls to make, and he was searching through the telephone directory again when Maggie arrived. Relieved, he let her do the searching and call Casper Jorgenson. There were still a lot of questions to ask, and he had most of an hour to ask them in.

That, Malone told himself without any conviction at all, was plenty of time.

Casper Jorgenson was perfectly free, and would be glad to come right down to Mr. Malone's office. The ride should take little more than five minutes, he said in a pleased, slightly oiled voice, and if Mr. Malone would wait until he had finished feeding his birds . . .

Mr. Malone, lighting a fresh cigar, said he would be glad to wait. There was no hurry at all, Mr. Malone thought, hanging up. Mr. Malone scowled horribly.

Motive, he thought, was something nobody had thought of. Of course, motive was easy. There was Max Hook's motive, although he knew he'd better stop thinking about that. He was in enough hot water. But if Breck had owed Max Hook money, murder was a perfectly possible result. Of course, Hook said that he hadn't worried about Breck's debts, and that he expected Breck to pay him back. But what else would Hook say if he'd actually killed Breck?

Not that Malone believed it for a minute, he reminded himself thankfully. If Hook had killed Alvin Breck, he'd have hired someone to do it, and arranged a couple of neatly unbreakable alibis. Locked rooms weren't Max Hook's style.

They weren't anybody's style, that Malone knew of.

How, he asked himself for the hundredth time, would someone manage to get into a locked and sealed room, turn on the gas, and leave?

At that point the telephone rang.

Maggie, in the outer office, picked it up. Her voice sounded strained. After a few seconds she put her hand over the receiver and called in: "Malone, it's for you."

"I died yesterday," Malone said.

"It's Captain Von Flanagan," Maggie said. "He sounds terrible."

"He is terrible," Malone said. "Leave me alone."

"He says he has to talk to you."

"I—" Nothing was going to be gained by avoiding the inevitable. Von Flanagan could have what was left, anyhow, after Max Hook was through.

Malone nodded and picked up the telephone.

"This is John J. Malone," he announced, and held the receiver away from his ear, waiting for the screams of Von Flanagan's wrath.

Surprisingly, the voice was mild and soothing. "I just thought you'd like to know how bad you put your foot in it, Malone," Von Flanagan said.

"What?"

"We sent a man up to that Breck apartment just a little while ago, and he found a suicide note. Typewritten—but Breck did everything on his typewriter, his fiancee told us. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"You might as well," Malone said.

Von Flanagan cleared his throat. "'I have nothing more to live for,'" he said. "'I am taking the easy way out. Goodbye.' What do you think of that, Malone?"

"I feel sorry for you," Malone said.

"What? Now listen—" Von Flanagan stopped, and then went on: "I shouldn't get mad at you, Malone. Everybody's entitled to one little mistake. And if you happened to make a big mistake, well, Malone, I won't say I told you so. I'll be just as friendly as if it had never happened, Malone. I—"

"When did you find the note?" Malone said.

"A man went up just a little while ago," Von Flanagan said. "He found it in the living room, on a chair."

"You'd searched the apartment last night?"

"Well," Von Flanagan said, "yes, but—after all, Malone, you could have missed it yourself . . ."

"Lying there on a chair," Malone said.

"That's right," Von Flanagan said. "Now don't go getting fancy on me, Malone—"

"Why did you send a man up today?" Malone asked.

"We got a telephone call," Von Flanagan said. "We got a tip. Now you listen to me, Malone. This is an open and shut case. There's no sense fooling around with it. It's nice and simple and don't I have enough troubles, Malone? I never wanted to be a cop at all except my old man owed a favor to the alderman and . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Von Flanagan," Malone said. "After all, anybody can make one little mistake. Even a Homicide Squad Captain." He hung up gently.

Then he leaned back in his chair. He was beginning to feel a lot better. The suicide note, he told himself, explained everything. There was no doubt at all in his mind that Alvin Breck had been murdered, and he even knew who had murdered him.

Of course, Malone told himself, there were little details. He might be shot dead at any time. But that wasn't really anything to worry about.

The door opened and Helen Connell came in, with Casper Jorgenson behind her.

"Well, Miss Connell," Malone said, shifting mental gears in a hurry.

Behind her, Jorgenson looked small, pale and helpless. He smiled hesitatingly at Malone. "And Mr. Jorgenson," Malone said.

"I met him downstairs," Helen Connell said. "I was coming to see you. After you called—I got to thinking that maybe there was something I could do."

"You just sit quietly," Malone said. "There's nothing to worry about. I've got to go outside and see about something. I'll only be a minute."

"Of course," Jorgenson said.

"I'll wait," Helen Connell said.

Malone slipped into the outer office. "Call Von Flanagan," he told Maggie. "Tell him to be down here right away." He was about to go back to his clients when the door opened again. A gigantic woman and a small, mustached man confronted him.

"Aha," the woman said.

Malone said: "Aha?"

"We find out about you from the doorman at the theater," the woman said. "He knows your face. John J. Melon. The lawyer. We wonder why it is a lawyer pretending to be a story writer. Then we think of Alvin Breck, and we think you are suspecting my husband of killing the man Breck."

"Suspecting?" Malone said.

Everything, he thought, was happening much too quickly.

"This is not a nice thing to do, suspect Alfonso the Great," the woman said.

"Not nice at all," Alfonso added.

Malone took a deep breath. After all this was over, he promised himself, he was going to spend about a week in Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, just recuperating. Perhaps he could move into Joe the Angel's back room, and live there. The idea sounded very peaceful.

But now: "Come into my office," he said quietly. "I think we can straighten everything out very simply."

Suspiciously, they followed him. Malone's small inner office was crowded with the four people in it, not counting Malone himself, who went behind his desk, sat down and regarded everybody with an impersonal benevolence.

"We'll only have a few minutes to wait," he said. "I'm expecting another visitor or two any minute."

Von Flanagan's arrival was the signal for every body to look around and start whispering. That, Malone thought, was only natural. They'd all seen the Homicide Squad Captain before, and they were all wondering what he was doing in Malone's offices.

"Mysterious telephone calls!" Von Flanagan said, shutting the door behind him. "I'm telling you, Malone, if it wasn't for our long-standing friendship—"

Malone quieted him with a single motion of his

hand. Everybody turned round again, this time to look at the little lawyer. He took his time about lighting a cigar, and rapidly filled the small office with blue smoke. Then he cleared his throat.

"I guess you're wondering why I called you all here," he said. That wasn't quite true—he hadn't called Helen Connell, for one, or Alfonso and his wife, for at least two more—but it was such a fine opening it seemed a shame not to use it. "I heard about the death of Alvin Breck this morning. I'm now prepared to say that it wasn't suicide, but murder, and that I know who committed the murder."

Von Flanagan said: "One of these days, Malone—"

"Wait," Malone said. "Think about that suicide note for a minute. Everybody was in Alvin Breck's apartment this morning. Isn't it possible—considering that the police usually do at least a fair job of searching an apartment—that one of the people who was there this morning left that note?"

"But Malone—"

"And then, the person who'd left the note called the police and told them about it, just to make sure it was found? Just to make sure that Alvin Breck's death was definitely labeled a suicide?"

"This case was open and shut, Malone!" Von Flanagan roared.

"Everybody," Malone said, "assumed this was suicide because they couldn't figure out how the murderer got in and out of the locked room. Well—he didn't get out."

Von Flanagan's face was a deep, glowing purple. "Please, Malone," he said in a piteous voice. "Tell me what you're talking about."

"The pigeon," Malone said.

There was a scuffle, a thump, several cries and a thud. Von Flanagan had hold of Casper Jorgenson by the neck. "You come with me," Von Flanagan said in his best official tones.

Malone called after him: "Don't worry about a thing. And don't admit anything. I'm your lawyer—remember that."

Just before they got to the outer office, Jorgenson managed to twist around in Von Flanagan's grip. "Okay, Malone," he said, with surprising cheerfulness.

The door slammed.

Helen Connell said: "What's this all about?"

Alfonso and his wife added: "What is it going on?"

"Simple," Malone said. "The way I see it—and this is confidential, remember—Casper Jorgenson had some secret in his past and he was afraid that Alvin Breck, in his criminal researches, had dug that secret up. He had to kill Breck, and he worked out an ingenious method of doing it."

"What does the pigeon have to do with—"

"You can train pigeons to do almost anything," Malone said. "Look at carrier pigeons. Smart birds. All Casper had to do was train one bird to open a gas jet—which the pigeon could probably do with one claw tied behind its back—and then give Alvin Breck the bird. Breck kept the doors and windows closed while he worked—"

"That's right, Malone," Helen Connell said.

"—and the rest was easy," Malone said. "The pigeon was the real killer."

"But how did you—"

"How did I think of it?" Malone said. "The suicide note. It meant that somebody who wanted the death to look like suicide had forgotten a detail, and was desperately trying to patch it up. The note, I guess, reminded me of carrier pigeons carrying important notes from place to place. And the pigeon—it's all in the subconscious," he said vaguely. "Massa's in the cold, cold subconscious."

"My goodness," Helen Connell said.

Alfonso said: "But—"

"Oh, yes," Malone said. "Alvin Breck's digging up some old facts on you, Alfonso, reminded me that he could dig up facts on anybody—even Casper Jorgenson. The facts he found out about you—well, it was probably in Alsace-Lorraine, and it was a long time ago, and if you ever get in trouble call a good lawyer."

The enormous Madame said: "Mr. Melon?"

"What I mean is," Malone said slowly, "I don't care what he dug up. Or what you might have still hidden. Just remember the name—John J. Melon. Lawyer.

"We will remember," the enormous woman said.

The door was thrown open again.

"Well, well," Malone said. "So you came down yourself, Max?"

"It's the least I can do for an old pal," Max Hook said. "Even if he turns out to be a rat—"

"But I'm not a rat," Malone said cheerfully. He turned to the others. "You'll excuse me—a previous appointment. He got up and took Max Hook's arm, heading him for the door. "I'll explain everything," he told the gangster. "It's all very simple if you remember the pigeon—"

Everything, Malone knew, was going to be all right.

His brother was kicking him out, but he knew how to handle that. He'd handle it with his nice, faithful shotgun. . . .

ZEKE'S LONG ARM

by
C. B. GILFORD

OLEN HARTER sat with the shotgun cradled on his knees and a fiery hatred in his heart. Now and again he looked at his brother Zeke, and each time he looked the hatred seemed to surge up higher. But Zeke wasn't looking back. All his attention was on the rutted road. The headlights on the old truck were dim, and if it were to stay in one piece it had to be kept out of the deeper holes.

"You'll have to be finding yourself another place, Olen," Zeke said suddenly. He was the older brother. He didn't speak with anger, just firmness, and the certainty of being obeyed.

"I figured that," Olen said.

"Then you know," Zeke answered without sympathy.

"You're going to marry Widow Carrie," Olen went on accusingly.

"Going to. Saturday."

"And you're bringing her to our house. So there'll be no place for me."

"That's about it."

"Why don't you move in with her?"

Zeke wrestled with the steering wheel as the

truck bounced threateningly. "We don't want to," he said after a minute. "We're going to sell her place."

Olen couldn't keep the sneer out of his voice. "You'll have it real nice then, won't you? A farm all to yourself, somebody to cook for you, and money in the bank."

"I reckon to have it real nice," Zeke said calmly.

Olen felt the shotgun cold in his grasp. It was silent, lifeless . . . but there were shells for it in his pocket.

"What did you figure was going to happen to me?" he demanded.

"Figured you'd get along. You always hankered to go and work in some town. Now you can do it. You can meet up with some fancy women maybe too. That's what you always said you wanted. You ain't much of a farmer anyway. I won't need you any more. So you can go."

"Maybe I changed my mind, Zeke."

"Better change it back then."

"You're kicking me out whether I like it or not."

"Giving you your chance," Zeke corrected him.

They reached the top of a hill and started down the other side. The old engine coughed gratefully. Olen looked outside at the sky. There was a full moon, but now and then it went and hid behind patches of cloud. When it did, the headlights were hardly enough to keep the truck on the road. Because the road was nothing but a dark ribbon of rain-sodden clay winding through even darker brush. Olen cursed silently. Zeke wasn't much at the wheel. When the truck wasn't bouncing into holes and ruts, it was skidding into them. If he wasn't a better husband then he was a driver . . .

Olen cursed again, thinking of Widow Carrie. No wonder Zeke wanted him out of the house with her coming in.

The truck eased down the hill. The moon disappeared, and Zeke hunched farther over the wheel, straining to see. At the bottom, and just before they started to climb again, they hit something, a rock or a log, and one of the lights flickered off.

Zeke grunted with impatience. "Got to get them fixed," he said.

"With Widow Carrie's money," Olen said, "you can get a new truck."

Zeke didn't answer. He stopped the truck and climbed out heavily. Olen sat and watched him walk up to the front. Outlined by the one remaining light, Zeke bent and tried to coax the bad one.

Damn his hide, Olen thought. I could kill him . . .

And then the idea came. This was the place. This was the time. The shotgun was heavy and insistent in his grip.

He broke the weapon with hardly any sound and thumbed shells into it. Then he climbed out on his own side, and walked silently on the wet clay up to the front of the truck. Zeke didn't look up. He was too intent on trying to give the stubborn headlight just the right blow with the flat of his palm. But the trick wasn't working this time. Olen waited.

"Have to go on without it," Zeke said finally, and straightened.

Wisely, he didn't move, either toward or away from his brother. "What are you going to do with that?" he asked, meaning the shotgun.

"I'm going to change some things," Olen told him.

They were in the middle of silence and darkness, with no one else to see or hear. And only one of them had a gun.

"Only reason," Olen said, "that Widow Carrie is marrying you is that you own our farm. If that wasn't so, she'd like me better."

"You think that?" Zeke wondered grimly.

"Where do you think I've been nights lately when I said I was hunting and didn't come back with nothing?"

Zeke pondered this in his usual silence. He was a tall, gaunt man. His long arms might have reached the shotgun with one swift movement. But he knew better.

"All I have to do," Olen pointed out, "is to get rid of you. Then I can have the farm and the money and the Widow. That's the way I've figured it out, Zeke."

"There's a law against murder," Zeke said.

"They got to catch a murderer first. I've got that figured too."

"There's a higher law that says 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

"Don't give me your Bible talk, brother." But he felt nevertheless a tiny pinprick of dread.

"I'll give you more than that," Zeke answered.

His arm came up slowly. Olen backed a step instinctively and might have fired. But then he saw that Zeke wasn't trying for the gun. Instead the arm rose up in an accusing gesture. Zeke's pointing finger reached almost in his brother's face.

"I give you my curse," Zeke said. His voice was deep, harsh, and his words scalded. "Cain killed Abel and he had no rest or profit from it. A brother can't kill a brother. That's a law older than you and me, Olen. You won't profit from this. And I'll give you no rest neither. That's my curse. You wait and see . . ."

The arm and the pointing finger, solid as granite, loomed large and menacing. Fear, like a thousand needles now, cut into Olen's body. Convulsively he pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was deafening. The pellets passed under the accusing arm and smashed into Zeke's chest. The stern face behind the arm registered pain at first, then blankness and nothing. The corpse slumped against the radiator of the truck, then slid toward the ground. The right arm, retaining somehow the position it had last known

in life, leaned against a crumpled fender, with the hand in front of the dead light and now pointing skyward.

Olen observed this phenomenon of the arm. A momentary shiver passed through him, but then he smiled. "Go on pointing, Zeke," he said aloud. "You can tell God all about it now. Or maybe you're talking to the devil. That's more likely. Anyway I'm not listening."

He walked away and stowed the shotgun inside the truck. Then he went around to the back and got the shovel from among the pile of things that Zeke always carried there. When he returned to the front again, he saw that the right arm, supported by the fender, had not fallen to the ground as the arm of a dead body might be expected to do. But the fact only amused him now.

What he had to consider at the moment was far more important. A corpse with a shotgun hole in it and splattered with blood couldn't be just left. There was a question of burial and the best place for it.

In all directions was plenty of abandoned ground. He could dig anywhere in the brush. But a second thought stopped him. There'd be evidence maybe of fresh digging in the brush, what with uprooted young trees and scrub lying all around. Somebody might see the place and wonder, especially with Zeke suddenly not being around any more.

No, he had to plant Zeke in a place where there wasn't even the smallest chance of people noticing anything strange. Then he could tell them that Zeke just went off and never came back. Maybe because he didn't want to marry the Widow and was afraid she'd make him do it. If there was no dead body to prove anything different, folks might think about it for a while, but not for long. Zeke hadn't had any close friends who'd be specially interested. So it was just a question of the right place . . .

And he was standing on it! The idea surprised him with its simplicity. The road itself was the best place. No digging up brush. Easy to cover up. The light of the truck to work by. He started to dig.

It was back-breaking work, even in the beginning. The wet clay was heavy and stubborn. But Olen was a big man, with good muscles that years of working for Zeke had made hard and fit. And now he was working for himself. That made it a pleasure.

He dug swiftly, setting the shovelfuls of dirt just barely aside to make putting them back easier. He dug the grave long, because if it was long enough for Zeke to stretch out in, it wouldn't have to be so deep. But deep enough though, to keep the smell of fresh blood away from wandering dogs and other animals.

He didn't know how long he worked. He had no fear of being disturbed. He just wanted to get it done with, so he could go home and sleep in a house that belonged to him. Maybe it took two hours.

When it was ready he dragged Zeke. The upraised arm was a convenient handle. He dragged the body by that part of it, to one side of the hole, from where a nudge of his shoe could topple it in. Four feet down it went, all at once, with a dull, muffled sound. The arm, stiff now, still pointed upward, reaching almost to the lip of the grave.

"Looks like you're trying to climb out, Zeke." He was too tired to laugh though.

Replacing the dirt was easier. The broken-up clods filled the hole quickly. It was done in minutes. He stamped it down in a sort of dance of triumph. After that, there was only one more thing, the finishing stroke that would erase all signs that a man was buried here.

Olen got into the truck on the driver's side. The engine coughed reluctantly in starting but kept going. He moved the truck ahead a few feet, running it over the grave. Then, shifting gears, he backed it over the same short length of road. He repeated this process dozens of times, weaving both right and left, till all the dirt was firmed. He skidded a few times, and realized the new surface wasn't even and smooth. But then the rest of the road wasn't either. He stopped finally, got out, and inspected his work in the dim light. It looked fine to him.

So he was ready to go home when he climbed back into the truck. He shifted into low gear, pushed heavily on the gas pedal. It was a mistake. The rear wheels spun ominously. The truck moved ahead, then skidded a little. Olen responded with even heavier pressure on the gas. That too was a mistake. Now the wheels spun, the truck lurched, but sideways rather than ahead.

The sweat on his face, the sweat he'd gotten from digging his brother's grave, grew cold on his forehead then. He saw in his mind that arm, reaching upward, clutching. And he shouted, despite himself, "Let go, Zeke!"

He stood on the gas pedal, making the engine roar in the silence. He tried rocking the truck. But whatever he did, the smooth tires of the rear wheels only dug themselves deeper into the wet clay. He was afraid to climb out to push or lift, afraid that whatever was holding the truck could reach for him too.

So he was still there in the daylight when a neighbor came by. He had a shovel with fresh dirt upon it, a shotgun with one shell fired, spattered blood on his clothes, and the look of a madman in his face.

TROUBLE IN TOWN

"I'm not here to fight you," Lawson said. "This time we've got a common enemy. . . ."

A Clancy Ross Novelette

by RICHARD DEMING

WHEN SAM BLACK came into the second-floor casino of Club Rotunda and crooked a finger at Clancy Ross, the slim gambler's opaque blue eyes narrowed. The barrel-chested Black's primary function was managing the legitimate downstairs night club, and he rarely visited the second floor unless there was trouble.

Quickly but unobtrusively Ross moved over to his assistant. One jet-black eyebrow, in startling contrast to his prematurely silvery hair, moved upward in inquiry.

"Bix Lawson," Black said. "For his semi-annual why-don't-you-fall-in-line-with-the-rest-of-the-boys pep talk, I think. He's got two of his muscle men with him."

Ross flicked his eyes over the crowd in the gaming room, and Black said, "They're waiting in your office."

Ross frowned at him. "You escorted them up personally? Since when does Bix Lawson rate the red carpet?"

"It was precaution, not courtesy," Black said. "I thought you might need my moral support."

Clancy Ross said shortly, "When I start needing help to handle a mug like Lawson in my own club, I'll check into the old folk's home."

He moved toward the archway leading to the elevator lobby, and Black fell in at his side. Ross

stopped and looked at his assistant.

"There's three of them," Black said. "You may as well give up trying to brush me off, because I'm sticking like a leech."

The silver-haired gambler stared at him for a moment, then gave an impatient shrug and continued down the hall past the elevator to his private office. Black entered the office on his heels.

Bix Lawson, a huge, thick-shouldered man with a large head and slightly bulging eyes, was seated in one of the guest chairs before Ross's big mahogany desk. A dark, handsome man with the build of an athlete leaned an elbow against the small bar centered in one wall. The third man, a tall, rawboned individual with hooded eyes, was obviously Bix Lawson's bodyguard. He rested his back against the wall next to the door.

Clancy Ross noted them with a single comprehensive flick of his eyes, sat on the corner of his desk and stared at Bix Lawson. Sam Black took a position against the wall on the opposite side of the door from the bodyguard.

St. Stephen's political and racket boss cleared his throat. "Evening, Clancy. Thought it was time we had a little conference." He nodded toward the dark man at the bar. "You know Georgie Rowland, don't you?" He made no attempt to introduce the bodyguard.

Without looking at the dark man, Ross said, "I know all your hatchet men."

Georgie Rowland's dark face turned even darker, but there was no change in his expression.

Bix Lawson said a little aggrievedly, "You got a chip on your shoulder before I even open my mouth."

"I'm psychic," Ross told him. "This is your semi-annual try to talk me into falling in line with your organization. You brought your toughest muscle along to back up your sales talk."

Lawson emitted a humorless chuckle. "You're too touchy, Clancy. We got an agreement, remember? You can stay independent till hell freezes over, so long as you stay out of my hair. Have I been pushing you to fall in line lately?"

"Not for the past six months," Ross said dryly. "That's why I figured it was your semi-annual attempt."

"Well, it isn't. I brought Georgie along for his brains this time, not his muscle. He's my top lieutenant, and I thought he ought to be in on it."

"On what?"

"Our conference. For once you're going to have to play on my team. We've got a common enemy."

"We've had them before," Ross said without much interest. "Whoever it is, you fight him your way and I'll fight him mine. And spare me the same old arguments. I know I'd pay half the protection through your organization that I now have to pay direct. I know I'd have fifty guns to defend me if any outsider made a pass. I know I'm too pigheaded to recognize a good deal when I see it. You get the same old answer. I stay my own boss even if I have to shoot it out with your fifty guns, plus somebody else's fifty."

Lawson asked quietly, "Think you're tough enough to fight the syndicate alone?"

Ross cocked an eyebrow. "The national syndicate?"

"What other is there?" Lawson asked impatiently. "There's an advance team in town right now planning the first steps in taking over St. Stephen."

2.

"Oh?'

"Yes, oh. I'm a little like you, Clancy. I like to stay independent. These guys offer you the moon. Influence reaching right up to Washington, bigger income from expanded rackets, a guarantee that no strange mob will ever muscle in. But it's my town now, and I'm boss. Under them it would be their town, and I'd be chief flunky."

Clancy Ross grinned at the racket boss. "You finally understand my point of view, do you, Bix?"

"I always understood it. It was just bad politics to let you get away with staying independent. I've had to slap a couple of characters down who tried to follow your example. But on this thing we *have* to get together, or we'll both sink. I'm not asking you to come in the organization. I just want a temporary alliance, so the town can show these guys a solid front."

"What makes you think a solid front will scare them off? If they really want St. Stephen, they can raise a division for every gun you can raise."

"Sure," Bix agreed. "But I know how these guys operate. Quiet, if possible, and with guns only as a last resort. They don't like to see the syndicate get headline mention for muscling into places by force. They'd rather talk the existing local setup into cooperating. They could take over almost any town by force if they wanted to, of course, but that kind of stuff brings on state and, sometimes, even national crime investigations. When it looks like the local boys are going to put up an all-out resistance, they're inclined to figure it wouldn't be worth the effort."

"You're prepared to put up an all-out resistance?"

Bix Lawson nodded his heavy head. "If you're willing to back me up. You'd be the syndicate's opening wedge into town, Clancy, because you're the only independent. I figure they'll move in on you first to establish a beachhead. Once they got a toehold by taking over the Rotunda, they'd go all out. But if we stop them cold on their first move, they might back off."

Clancy Ross looked amused. "You make it sound as though you're offering a favor instead of asking

for one. What's this advance team consist of?"

"Just two guys. One named Harry May, and a hatchet man named Thumbs Dragget. They're holed up over at the Clark."

"They've already contacted you?"

"Me, and the D.A. and the police commissioner. They seem to know the right people to see. So far they're only feeling around to see how we take the idea of a syndicate tie-in. It's all been very friendly. But this guy Harry May has a habit of dropping casual remarks to let you know the syndicate intends to take over whether you like it or not."

Ross said, "If there's only two of them, why not just dump them in the river?"

Bix Lawson looked horrified. "Syndicate contact men? If they disappeared, half the guns in the country would descend on St. Stephen. I wouldn't live a week."

Clancy Ross musingly fingered the thin scar edging the left side of his jaw. "You think if we temporarily joined forces, they'd forget St. Stephen?"

"I don't know. I *do* know they won't forget it if we don't."

Ross mused a moment more. Finally he said, "You put up a good argument, Bix. I think I'll go along."

Lawson looked pleased and a little astonished. Sam Black just looked astonished.

"On my terms, of course," Ross added. "I'll run the operation, not you."

The racket boss stared at him. "You mean you want to give the orders? To take over *my* organization?"

"Just long enough to tie a can to the syndicate's tail. Take it or leave it."

Bix Lawson blinked. The dark Georgie Rowland said, "Who does this guy think he is? If you put him in the driver's seat, he'd stay there and leave you out in the cold."

Ross ignored the gang lieutenant, his gaze on Lawson. The big man sighed.

"No he wouldn't, Georgie," he said in a resigned voice. "If he wanted my spot, he'd have shot for it long ago. He's just too pigheaded to take orders from anybody, even to save his own neck. He doesn't deal off the bottom."

"Thanks," Ross said dryly.

Lawson eyed the gambler estimatingly, then sighed. "Those are your only terms, Clancy?"

"I said take it or leave it."

"Yeah. Well, it's the closest to a concession I ever got from you yet. All right, Clancy. I'll pass the word that you give the orders until further notice. But keep in touch with me. I want to know what's going on."

"Sure," Ross said.

When the political leader and racket boss of St. Stephen had departed, Sam Black looked at his employer wonderingly.

"Now I've seen everything," he said. "I've heard of men joining gangs, but this is the first time I ever heard of a gang joining a man."

3.

At noon the next day Clancy Ross parked his Lincoln on the side street edging the Hotel Clark. As he climbed out of the car, he thoughtfully eyed the blue sedan which rolled past and turned right at the corner. It was driven by a dark-featured, thickset man who carefully didn't look at him as he drove past.

During the drive from Club Rotunda Ross had spotted the same sedan three times in his rear-view mirror.

Shrugging, he crossed the street and entered the hotel.

Harry May and Thumbs Dragget, who was registered as Ronald Dragget instead of under his nickname, were in the fifth-floor suite. A Georgia May was also listed there.

"I didn't know Mr. May had his wife along," Ross commented to the desk clerk.

"His sister, sir," the clerk corrected. "Wish me to ring the suite?"

Ross told him not to bother, and went on up.

A full-busted blonde in her late twenties answered his knock, a languorous, sleepy-eyed woman whose slow movements, expression and dress made a deliberate parade of her sensuality. She wore lounging pajamas with bright red bottoms and a black top, the latter open to the third button and with the lapels folded back, so that fully half the swell of her bosom was exposed.

"You must be Harry's sister," Ross said. "Your brother around?"

After carefully looking him over, the blonde smiled. "If you think he's my brother, you don't know him well enough to call him Harry. But come on in."

She shut the door after him and looked at him expectantly.

"I'm Clancy Ross," the gambler said. "Which way do I go?"

"To find Harry? No way. He's out. Clancy Ross, did you say?"

Ross nodded.

"Club Rotunda, isn't it?"

He nodded again.

"I heard Harry and Thumbs mention you. I think that's where they are now. Looking for you. You must have passed each other. What do you drink?"

The abrupt question startled him a little. "Nothing before lunch. But don't let me stop you."

"I won't," she assured him, crossing to a table containing a number of bottles, glasses and a bowl of ice. "I'm a compulsive, you know."

"A compulsive?" Ross asked. He realized the

woman was a trifle tipsy.

"Compulsive drinker. Harry says that's a polite term for a lush." She picked up a glass containing the dregs of a drink, poured gin and soda, and added ice. "My name's Georgia Fell, in case you're interested."

"Fell? I thought it was Georgia May."

"The Clark's a respectable hotel," she told him. "It looks better on the register for me to be his sister."

She took a gulp of her drink, then swayed over to Ross and examined him interestedly. "Do I talk too frankly?" she asked.

"You're a little outspoken," he conceded. "But I don't embarrass easily."

"Neither do I. Harry says I have no shame. He says I'm a nympho."

"Oh? And are you?"

"I suppose. I don't have much resistance." She drained her glass, took it back to the table and returned to Ross again. She stopped a fraction of an inch from him and looked up into his face. "In fact after a couple of drinks, I don't have any. I had three before you got here."

He grinned down at her. "That's something else I don't indulge in before lunch. Besides, isn't friend Harry likely to return at any minute?"

"There's a chain on the door."

"I doubt that I could enjoy it with the master of the house pounding to get in," Ross said dryly.

Giving a resigned shrug, she walked over to the windows and stared pensively down into the street. He moved over to stand beside her.

The windows faced the side street where Ross's Lincoln was parked, and his eyes narrowed as he saw a blue sedan backing into the parking place behind it. He watched as the same dark-featured man he had spotted previously climbed from the sedan and walked over to stand next to the Lincoln.

The man glanced around, then lifted the hood of the Lincoln and removed a bulky package from beneath his coat. From five stories up the hood of the Lincoln hid what he was doing when he bent over the engine.

"What are you looking at?" Georgia Fell asked.

"Just admiring the view," Ross said easily, deliberately moving his gaze from the street to her half-unbuttoned pajama top.

"Like mountain scenery?" she inquired. "Maybe there's a little life in you after all. Is it just reluctance to play in another man's back yard which makes you act hard to get?"

"I feel cozier in my own back yard."

"Then maybe I'll drop over and see you late tonight. But don't wait up, because I may run into some other man before I get there. I'm not very dependable."

Ross grinned at her and moved back into the room. At that moment a key rasped in the lock of the outer door and the door swung open.

The first man who entered was a giant about six feet four inches tall and weighing at least two hundred and fifty pounds. He had a wide, square head with a button nose and two little birdlike eyes. He was totally bald, even lacking eyebrows.

A slender, gray-haired man in his mid forties followed the giant in. Dressed in a conservative business suit, he looked like a successful executive.

The big man didn't look intelligent enough to be the brainy half of the syndicate's advance team. Ross addressed himself to the other.

"Harry May?"

The slender man nodded. The giant stood with his arms hanging at his side, gorillalike, eyeing Ross suspiciously.

Ross said, "I'm Clancy Ross."

"Well," Harry May said. "I've just been over to your place looking for you." He offered a cordial handshake.

May introduced his companion as Thumbs Dragget and waved Ross to a chair.

Then he turned to the blonde Georgia and said in a curt tone, "Blow, baby."

Georgia picked up the tray of drinking material and drifted from the room.

When all three men were seated, and Ross had shaken his head to the offer of a drink, Harry May said, "Since you're here, you obviously know why I'm in town, Mr. Ross. Shall we get right down to business?"

Ross said, "Might as well."

"I suppose you know who I represent, and what my organization has to offer St. Stephen?"

4.

"I've already laid the groundwork for local cooperation with my organization, you may know. I've had contacts with a number of local officials and with your Mr. Bix Lawson, who appears to be the real power behind the scenes in city politics."

Ross raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean, you've laid the groundwork? I know you've had the contacts you mention, but you haven't gotten any commitments."

May waved a dismissing hand. "Ostensibly my offers are being considered. But you really don't think there'll be much resistance to an organization as powerful as the one I represent, do you?"

Noncommittally Ross asked, "What's your offer to me?"

"An important place in the new setup, if you jump on the bandwagon first. I understand you're the only independent gambler in town, and have your own private arrangements with certain officials for such matters as protection. It would simplify things considerably if I had you on my side. Establish a sort of beachhead, as it were."

"It would do more than that," Ross said. "It

would give you the town on a platter."

It was Harry May's turn to raise his eyebrows. "Aren't you overestimating your importance a little, Mr. Ross?"

Ross grinned at him. "I have a surprise for you, Mr. May. You've been wasting your time talking to the D.A. and police commissioner and Bix Lawson. My decision is the only one you need. I give all the orders in St. Stephen and make all the decisions. If you want to check that, lift your phone and call Bix Lawson at his suite over at the Plaza."

The syndicate advance man stared at him for a moment, then rose and stepped to the phone. After asking for Bix Lawson's suite at the Plaza, he carried on a short, low-toned conversation. When he hung up, he examined Ross thoughtfully.

"This changes things a little. Is this a new development? I was informed you had no connection with Lawson's organization."

"I took it over last night," Ross said easily. "Lock, stock and barrel. Your sydicate can't make a move in this town without dealing with me."

Harry May scratched his chin. "I see. And how do you feel about co-operating?"

"Dead set against it."

There was a long silence. Finally May said, "It isn't either wise or healthy to fight the organization I represent."

"I never claimed to be wise," Ross said. "But anybody can tell you I take the prize for stubbornness. The only way your syndicate will ever take over St. Stephen is with guns, Mr. May. And you're going to have a lot of dead gunnies if you try it."

The gray-haired man's face darkened. He stared at Ross silently as the gambler came lazily erect.

"I'll give you and your pal Dragget until six P.M. to get out of town," Ross said conversationally. "Tell your syndicate bosses the next contact man they send will be met by a bullet."

Harry May's face grew even darker. "So far I've kept my dealings in this town friendly, Mr. Ross. Maybe it's time to show a little steel."

"If you like the taste of steel," Ross said. "I'll make you eat it."

May smiled without humor. "Teach our guest some manners, Thumbs."

Thumbs came to his feet in a movement almost graceful for so large a man. After staring at Ross expressionlessly for a moment, he slid toward him. The gambler's face remained equally expressionless.

A foot from Ross the big man's fist suddenly lashed outward. It met empty air when the slim gambler tilted his head slightly to one side. An instant later a solid right in the solar plexus drove the wind from Dragget and arched his body forward. Ross brought him even farther forward by grasping both shoulders and thrusting downward. At the same time he brought up a knee.

There was a sickening crunch, the big man crashed over backward and lay gasping, blood streaming from a broken nose.

Harry May slid a hand toward his armpit, then froze when, with a flickering motion, a .38 appeared in Ross's hand. When May's hand cautiously dropped to his side, Ross's gun disappeared again.

Ross moved sidewise toward the door, his eyes on the gray-haired man.

"Six o'clock," he said as he reached behind him to pull open the door.

He gave Harry May a friendly grin, stepped out into the hall and pulled the door closed behind him.

5.

The blue sedan was nowhere in sight when Ross reached his Lincoln. Raising the hood, he studied the wax-cloth wrapped bundle nestled alongside the manifold. Two wires led from the bundle, one to a spark plug, the other grounded to the frame.

Gingerly Ross disengaged both wires and lifted the bundle out. Working loose a friction-tape seal, he unwrapped the wax cloth covering just far enough to satisfy himself that the bomb consisted of three sticks of dynamite and a detonating cap. After removing the detonating cap and dropping it in his pocket, he rewrapped the dynamite and casually tossed it in the back seat.

Before driving away, he frowned up at the fifth-floor windows of Harry May's suite, his expression vaguely dissatisfied. The timing of the assassination attempt puzzled him.

It was nearly two when Ross got back to the Rotunda, because he stopped for lunch en route. The club didn't open till four, but Sam Black was already there, checking the evening's menu. Ross tossed him the homemade bomb.

After examining it, Black asked, "On your car?"

Ross nodded.

"Shades of the nineteen twenties," Black said. "You stirred up a good old-fashioned gang war, huh?"

"Maybe," Ross said. "Or maybe somebody's just playing a cute little joke."

"Some joke. You could die laughing."

"I don't like the timing," Ross said. "The bomb was planted before Harry May knew I wasn't going to co-operate. Unless he got an advance tip that I wasn't, and was just putting on an act with me."

Sam Black hiked his eyebrows. "Now that's interesting. You think Bix tried to pull a double-cross?"

"What sense would that make? If he planned to go along with the syndicate, why would he go through all the rigmarole of wanting to put up a united front? I think I'd better talk to Bix, though."

Walking behind the solid-glass bar, he dialled the Plaza and asked for Lawson's suite. The racket boss himself answered the phone.

"Clancy?" Lawson said in a high voice. "I was just going to call you. Slim just got the hell blown out of him."

"Slim?"

"My bodyguard. The tall guy with me yesterday. They blew up the Cadillac, Slim, half the other cars parked in the hotel garage, and injured the garage attendant. It was just blind luck I wasn't in the Caddy too."

"Who's 'they'?" Ross asked.

"I don't know. The syndicate, I guess. Who else? Ordinarily that car never moves unless I'm in it. But today it was due for a grease job, so Slim was taking it down to the station that services it. He touched the starter, and BOOM!"

"How long ago?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes. Christ, the blast shook the whole building. I don't think the management has even stopped running around in circles enough yet to call the cops."

"When do you think it was planted?" Ross asked.

"I don't know. Any time after last midnight. The car hasn't been used since it was put away last night."

Ross said, "I found one in my car too. Looks like somebody's declared war."

Bix Lawson was silent for a time. Then he said ruefully, "I guess my idea that the syndicate would back down from a show of strength was a little optimistic."

"Maybe, maybe not," Ross said obscurely. "How fast can you get hold of Georgie Rowland?"

"Immediately. Why?"

"A couple of hours ago I gave Harry May and Thumbs Dragget until six P.M. to get out of town. But I just changed my mind. I want to ask May a few questions. Have Rowland and some of the boys pick them up and deliver them here."

Lawson said dubiously, "Listen, Clancy, we wouldn't stand a chance in an all-out war if the syndicate really means business. And it looks to me like it does. Maybe we ought to sue for peace, now that our bluff failed."

"It wasn't a bluff," Ross snapped at him. "You said I was to run this operation my way. If you're backing out, say so, and I'll go after May and Dragget myself."

"Yeah, I suppose you would," Lawson said in a rueful tone. "Which would get May just as mad at me as at you, because I told him you were running the show for the whole town. All right, Clancy. I'll stick to our original agreement. Incidentally, there'll be cops swarming all over this place before long because of the bombing. So if you call again and I give you some double talk, you'll know I have company."

"Check," Ross said. "Get Rowland and the boys moving before they get there."

When he hung up, Sam Black asked, "What do you have in mind? A river swim for May and Dragget?"

"Just some questions," Ross said. "I'm curious to know why war started before either side knew the other was mad."

6.

At four P.M. Ross was seated at his office desk when the phone rang. It was Sam Black calling from downstairs to tell him Georgie Rowland and one of his men were on the way up.

A few moments later a knock came at the door. When Ross called, "Come in," the handsome gang lieutenant entered, followed by an oversized muscle man Ross knew casually, and who went by the name of Herman the Goat.

Ross said, "Where's May and Dragget?"

"Flew the coop," Georgie Rowland said apologetically. "I've stationed boys at the railroad station, bus depot and airport, but there's no sign of them yet. I left orders to deliver them here the minute they show."

Ross frowned. "When did they check out?"

"Ten minutes before we got to the Clark. About three."

"It took you over an hour?" the gambler asked sharply. "I talked to Bix at two."

"I had to round up the boys," Rowland said a little sullenly. "We got there as soon as we could."

Ross continued to frown at him, then waved a dismissing hand. "All right. Just make sure your boys don't let them slip out of town. And tell Bix to phone me. I don't want to call him and have some cop answer the phone."

Bix Lawson phoned at six P.M. He had nothing to report except that the police had questioned him about the bombing and he'd told them he had no idea of who might have planted the bomb. There had been no reports from the men stationed at the railroad depot, bus depot or airport.

"They might have slipped out of town by car," he suggested.

Ross merely grunted.

"Incidentally," Lawson said, "I've had calls from both the D.A. and the police commissioner. They're having fits at the prospect of St. Stephen having a full-scale gang war. I think they're afraid they'll start finding bombs in their cars."

Ross said, "Tell them to walk to work for a while and to keep their pants on. They're both fat enough so that the exercise will do them good."

By nine P.M. there had still been no reports on Harry May or Thumbs Dragget. Ross was circulating through the gaming room, keeping a benevo-

lent but watchful eye on both the patrons and house men when his gaze suddenly jumped to the archway from the elevator lobby.

Quickly Ross moved to meet her. She had stopped just inside the room and was gazing around vaguely when he stopped before her. She gave him a delighted smile.

"See, I'm dependable after all," she said. "I even sneaked out on Harry to keep our date."

He looked her up and down. Tonight she wore a gold lame evening gown with a low V in front which exposed as much bosom as the unbuttoned pajama top had. She was entirely steady on her feet, but a certain over-preciseness of movement suggested she had been continuing her regular consumption of gin and soda ever since that morning.

Taking her arm, Ross steered her back through the archway and down the hall to his office. When he shut the door behind them, her lips spread in a smile.

"You don't play so hard to get in your own back yard, do you?" she asked. "You whisk me behind locked doors before you even say hello."

"It's not locked," he said. "You can flee any time you fear for your honor. Have a drink?"

As he started to move toward the built-in bar, she slipped between him and it. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she leaned against his chest and looked up at him.

"I've been having drinks since ten this morning," she said. "Now I feel like indulging another of my vices."

7.

When Ross looked down at her, she raised her lips invitingly. But instead of taking the invitation, he asked, "How'd you slip away from Harry?"

"Just stepped down the lobby for cigarettes and kept going. What's it matter?"

"Maybe he followed you here."

She giggled. "Not Harry. I think he'll stay away from you after what you did to Thumbs. He scares easy."

"Oh? I thought he was supposed to be tough."

"Harry? He'd faint if he cut himself shaving. We ran from the Clark like scared rabbits after he got the phone call."

"The phone call?"

"He got a call about two thirty. We're over at the Claridge now. You going to kiss me?"

"Sure," Ross said, giving her a quick peck, disengaging himself and moving around her to the bar. "How about that drink?"

She pouted at him. "Am I repulsive or something?"

"You set me on fire," he said with light mockery. "But this is a business office. Some patron might walk in to cash a check at any minute. Later on we'll go upstairs to my apartment."

"Oh," she said with a mixture of disappointment and acceptance.

"About this phone call," Ross said. "Who was it from?"

She shrugged indifferently. "I don't know anything about Harry's business. I just came along from Chicago for the free drinks. All I know is that it was some kind of warning, and we checked out a half hour later. If it's you who's after him, you'll find him at the Claridge."

He examined her curiously. "If you think it's me, why are you ratting on your boy friend?"

"Boy friend? This is just a weekend excursion. Harry comes in the night club where I worked in the chorus line. He just happened to drop in the night my engagement was up, and asked how I'd like to take a trip. I don't owe him anything, and I don't particularly like him. You can pump him full of holes for all I care."

"You know anything about him?"

She shook her head. "Only that he has his ups and downs. Sometimes he's loaded, sometimes he hasn't the price of a cup of coffee."

"Hmm—" Ross said. "Kind of odd for a syndicate big shot."

He lapsed into a brown study, unconsciously rubbing the thin scar alongside his jaw as he thought this development over.

Georgia interrupted his thoughts by saying, "How about that drink you offered?"

"Mix it yourself, will you, honey?" he said. "And a Scotch and water for me. I have to make a phone call."

Seating himself at his desk, he lifted the phone and said, "I want to make a call to Chicago."

An hour later Bix Lawson, accompanied by a new bodyguard in place of the dead Slim, strode down the hall to Ross's office. Behind Lawson and his bodyguard came Georgie Rowland and Herman the Goat.

Inside the office Lawson looked from Clancy Ross to Georgia Fell and asked, "What's up? This doesn't look like an urgent meeting."

"It'll develop into one," the gambler assured him. "Sit down and relax until the rest get here."

He introduced the blonde Georgia Fell with the casual information that she was a friend of Harry May's. Both Bix Lawson and Georgie Rowland narrowed their eyes at this, but neither made any comment.

Five minutes later Sam Black herded Harry May and Thumbs Dragget into the office. Harry May looked reproachfully at Georgia Fell, then gave Clancy Ross a fearful look. His huge companion had two black eyes and a bandage of overlapping tape across his nose. His eyes avoided those of Clancy Ross.

The new arrivals took seats amid dead silence.

Sam Black faded into a corner with his back against the wall.

Without preliminaries Ross announced, "I made a phone call to Louie Pastrami in Chicago about an hour ago."

No one said anything for a few moments. Then Bix Lawson asked puzzledly, "The syndicate's pay-off man?"

Ross nodded. "I'd hardly class him as a friend, but he's been in the Rotunda, so I know him casually. Well enough to ask a question and get an answer. Now you'd say Louie Pastrami would know most of the moves the syndicate was making, wouldn't you?"

Lawson said, "You'd think so."

"And he'd certainly know about any plan as big as taking over a city of a half million."

In a nervous voice Harry May said, "What are you getting at, Ross?"

Ross threw him a humorless smile. "Louie Pastrami never heard of either you or your oversized friend Dragget. You haven't any more connection with the syndicate than I have."

Silence grew in the room. Harry May's face paled slightly. Thumbs Dragget looked at the floor. Bix Lawson stared intently from the two pseudo syndicate men to Ross.

Finally Lawson said, "I don't get it."

"You nearly got it," Ross told him. "The whole stunt was a buildup for that bomb in your Caddy. Which you missed only because it was time for a grease job. Who'd have gotten the blame if you'd been in the Caddy at the time, Bix?"

In a slow voice Lawson said, "The syndicate, I guess."

"Of course," Ross said. "And who would move into your spot to carry on the supposed fight against the syndicate?"

Lawson turned his head to look at his lieutenant, Georgie Rowland.

"Now wait a minute," the handsome gang lieutenant said. "What kind of fast one you trying to pull, Ross?"

"It was you who tried to pull the fast one, Georgie. Only you loused it up by having the bombs planted too soon. It didn't make sense for the syndicate to start a war before anyone turned down its proposition. It made even less sense to plant a bomb in my car *before* anybody but you and Bix and I knew I was general of the local army. To top your list of mistakes, you warned Harry May to run from the Clark before you went after him, because you couldn't afford to have me ask him questions. You should have picked him and Dragget up and bumped them both."

Georgie Rowland licked his lips and stared at the gambler.

Ross said, "You imported these small-time punks to put on an act for the benefit of local officials, so everyone would think the syndicate bumped your boss. If you'd just had him killed outright, the finger would point straight at you, and you knew the top boys in the local organization wouldn't put up with a kill just to satisfy your ambition."

Georgie Rowland's face was now shiny with perspiration. His gaze darted from Ross to Lawson and back again. Then his right hand surreptitiously began to slide beneath his coat.

Ross's eyes glittered at him. With his hand flat on the desk top, he urged, "Go ahead, Georgie, if you think you're fast enough."

The gang lieutenant stared at him, sweat streaming from his face. Then his hand fell into his lap. Bix Lawson's bodyguard stepped behind his chair, dipped a hand beneath Rowland's coat and pocketed a thirty-eight revolver.

Lawson said tonelessly, "Take him down to the car. I'll be down in a minute."

With his hand on the gun in his pocket, the bodyguard urged Georgie Rowland from the room. The gang lieutenant looked back over his shoulder at Lawson just before the door closed behind them, and the expression on his face was one of complete hopelessness.

Bix Lawson looked at May and Dragget. "How about these two guys?" he asked Ross.

Ross shrugged. "Just a couple of two-bit punks hired for an acting job. I'd stick them on a train."

Harry May said in a high voice. "We were just doing a job, Mr. Lawson. Let us go and we'll never come back to St. Stephen."

The racket boss studied them for a moment, then a little contemptuously ordered Herman the Goat to escort them to the railroad station and see that they caught a train.

When this trio had departed, Ross said, "There's one final loose end. The character Rowland hired to plant the bombs is an import too. I saw him from a distance, and he's none of your boys. Thickset, dark features, somewhere in his thirties. Maybe if you asked Rowland in a nice way, he'd tell you his name."

"He'll tell me," Lawson said with macabre assurance. He glanced at Georgia Fell. "How about May's girl friend here?"

"She's sticking around," Ross said. "I promised to show her my apartment."

"Oh," Lawson said. Rising he went to the door. As he opened it Clancy Ross called, "One last thing, Bix."

The racket boss turned and looked at him inquiringly. The gambler grinned at him.

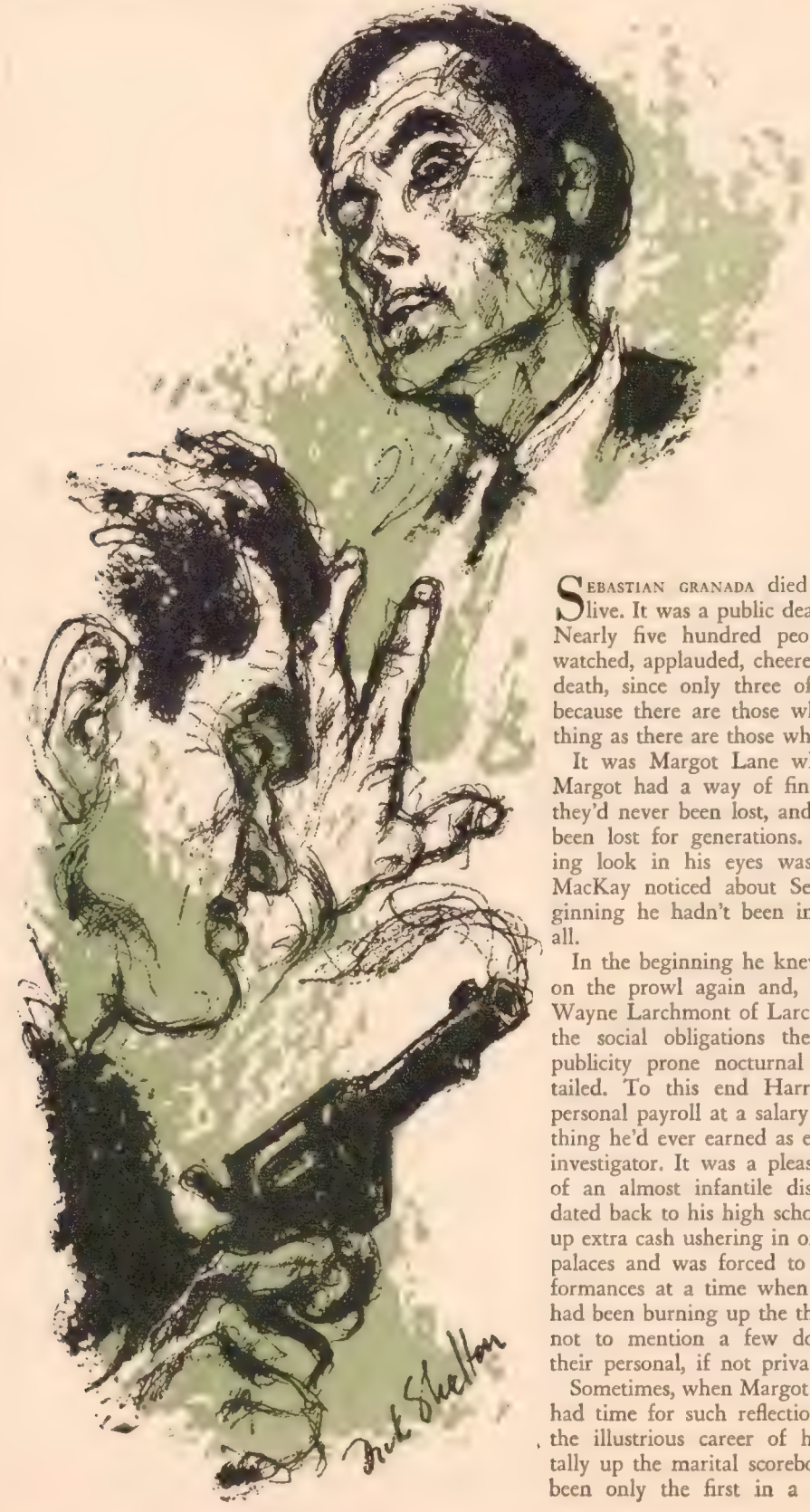
"You can have your gang back now that the war's over."

Granada was a handsome, talented guy, but that wasn't what MacKay noticed about him. The thing MacKay noticed was the fear in his eyes . . .

you're DEAD

A Novelette

by HELEN NIELSEN



SEBASTIAN GRANADA died the night he began to live. It was a public death—almost an execution. Nearly five hundred people watched him die—watched, applauded, cheered and wept—not for his death, since only three of them knew of it, but because there are those who have tears for everything as there are those who have tears for nothing.

It was Margot Lane who discovered Sebastian. Margot had a way of finding things, even when they'd never been lost, and Sebastian Granada had been lost for generations. The frightened, searching look in his eyes was the first thing Harry MacKay noticed about Sebastian; but in the beginning he hadn't been interested in Sebastian at all.

In the beginning he knew only that Margot was on the prowl again and, now that she was Mrs. Wayne Larchmont of Larchmont Aircraft, with all the social obligations the position entailed, her publicity prone nocturnal habits had to be curtailed. To this end Harry was on Larchmont's personal payroll at a salary considerably above anything he'd ever earned as either a public or private investigator. It was a pleasant occupation, in spite of an almost infantile dislike for Margot which dated back to his high school days when he picked up extra cash ushering in one of the plushier movie palaces and was forced to endure continuous performances at a time when she and Ronald Hayes had been burning up the then unwidened screens—not to mention a few double-wicked candles in their personal, if not private, lives.

Sometimes, when Margot was dormant and Harry had time for such reflections, he thought back on the illustrious career of his charge and tried to tally up the marital scoreboard. Ronald Hayes had been only the first in a long and distinguished

line of legal mates, each of whom had been the love of Margot's life—next to Margot, of course. Three on a match never lasts, but Harry, who was quite happy with his new Lincoln and his spacious apartment above the Strip, was determined to see that this one ran at least par for the course. It was for this reason that he descended from the smog-free heights to delve into the cut-rate Latin atmosphere of a small restaurant-bar on the lower end of Sunset. Even before he saw Sebastian, he found Margot.

What she had, time would never take from her. She sat alone at a small table near the wall—perfectly groomed and posed as if momentarily expecting a cameraman. No one, including Margot herself, was certain of her exact age. The lights were dim and kind. Margot seemed eternal. But her real name was Maggie Delaney, and her father had coughed himself to death in a coal mine in Kentucky. This was the sort of thing Harry remembered when he saw the way her hand gripped the glass on the table before her. Bourbon on the rocks and no chaser. It was always that when she went off alone at night.

She didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Sit down, Mr. MacKay," she said. She pronounced the name so that it rhymed with hay. "What are you drinking?"

Harry sat down at her table.

"The name is MacKay," he told her. "It rhymes with high, which I occasionally am—but not on company time."

"And am I on company time, too, Mr. MacKay?" The name still rhymed with hay. "Occupation—wife. No holidays. No time off for bad behavior."

Harry gave the restaurant a quick survey. It was dark and dirty. It was occupied by perhaps a dozen sad-eyed couples who didn't seem to like either one another or the atmosphere. The music was a discordant annoyance at the far end of the room; the food smelled terrible, and the liquor would be strictly bar class. Margot's territory for prowling had deteriorated.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Larchmont loves you. I wouldn't have a job if he didn't."

She didn't look at him. She looked at the bourbon.

"Wayne Larchmont loves a myth," she said. "A goddess."

"Every man who loves loves a goddess. That's what love is—they tell me. Let's forget the seamy past, Mrs. Larchmont. Let's go home."

"Not yet."

"What are we waiting for—the floor show?"

2.

It was meant to be a joke. This was a place for unhappy people to stumble around in one another's arms; it wasn't for entertainment. But Harry had barely finished the words when a pudgy individual in a ruffled shirt and shiny tuxedo pants took over at a hand mike in front of the orchestra and delivered a few poor jokes at which the patrons smiled nervously but never quite laughed. Margot edged forward on her chair. She was either hard of hearing or near-sighted; but the significant thing was that she'd obviously come for something other than the bourbon. That was when Harry began to worry.

"Who is he?" he asked. "And are you sure you can afford him?"

"You have a nasty mind, Mr. MacKay," she said.

"I'm in a nasty mood. I haven't mentioned it to your husband, but I'm still wondering what happened that night three weeks ago when you didn't take a plane to San Francisco."

"Was I supposed to take a plane to San Francisco?"

"You were on the passenger list. I made the trip sitting alongside an empty seat reserved in the name of Mrs. Wayne Larchmont."

"Really? I must have forgotten. Did you have a nice flight, Mr. MacKay?"

"I get air-sick," Mrs. Larchmont.

"I'm so sorry. There must be something you can take for it."

Harry concentrated on his salary. For that he could take almost anything. Before he could think of a polite reply, the pudgy man with the ruffled shirt disappeared from in front of the orchestra. There was a disinterested smattering of applause and then the lights dimmed and a spotlight came on. There was to be a floorshow after all. Now Margot's eyes never left the round of light. Harry waited. A strumming of a guitar from the darkness, a clicking of castinets, and then he saw Sebastian for the first time—small, wiry, very young in his make-up. Very colorful in his tight trousers and sash. A dancer. Harry wasn't particularly fond of dancers—male. He saw all he cared to see of this one within a few seconds of his entrance. Margot didn't. She sat attentively all through the performance. Not until it was all over—the guitar, the castinets, the heels on the floor, the slightly more enthusiastic applause—not until then did she lean back in her chair and relax.

Harry repeated his original question.

"Who is he?"

"Sebastian Granada," she said. "I want him, Mr. MacKay."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you have such a delightfully corrupt mind, and because I think it's about time you did something to earn your salary. My husband is a busy man; he's away a good deal of the time."

"I know," Harry said. "That's why I'm working."

Margot ignored him. She was good at that.

"I need something to occupy my time," she said.

"He's awfully young, Mrs. Larchmont."

"So much the better. The young are ambitious. I think I can do something with Sebastian Granada, but I need your help. You look puzzled; but it's really very simple. I was a part of all this for years—most of my life. Don't you think I miss it? Don't you think I'd like to be a little part of it again?"

It was difficult to think of Margot as being a little part of anything. It was much easier to think what Harry had been thinking all along. But Harry wasn't paid for thinking; he was paid for being certain. If anything was in the wind that might develop into a threat to his happy employment, the safest course of action was to play along.

"What do you want me to do—bring him to the table?" he asked.

"No—not that way. I want to know more about him first. He may not be the talent I'm looking for. I don't want to be cruel and build up his hopes for nothing."

This was Margot Lane talking. Harry listened and tried to believe what he heard. This thoughtfulness —this consideration for others—didn't ring true. But marriage to Larchmont might have made a difference.

"I leave the method up to you," she added. "I don't intend to come here any more, now that you've been a good little bodyguard and finally found me—as I was sure you would."

She gave him one of her lower register smiles and left the table. Harry wanted to follow her out—the dancer might be merely a decoy to keep him occupied while she kept another rendevouz; but he had his orders, and they led him off on a trek down the back hall in search of what was to be the lucky Senor Granada if Margot hadn't forgotten all about him in the morning. On the way, he ruminated. He should have watched the dancer closer—but then, Harry was no judge of talent. Neither was Margot. In the past she had sponsored an Italian street singer, a cowboy yodler, and even a choir boy or two. That was in the years long before she met Wayne Larchmont, but Harry always did research on his jobs. In spite of this knowledge, he made his way past the bar, the kitchen, and the garbage cans to the only possible door to a dressing room with an uneasy sense of something not quite right. Margot's latest marriage was less than six months old. Even in her more hectic days she never got restless that soon.

But he had no time to pursue the thought farther. Two smart raps on the door and it opened cautiously—one inch—two inches—three inches. He recognized a slice of a dark face and one apprehensive eye.

"Senor Granada—" he began. One hand went groping for a handkerchief in his pocket. That trek through the back hall jungle had started to wilt the collar of his fifty dollar shirt. He got no farther with the conversation. It might have been the gesture that did it; but suddenly the narrow opening, the slice of face, and the one eye disappeared simultaneously with a brief reply,

"I'm sorry. No Senor Granada here. He has gone."

All Harry learned about Sebastian on his first attempt was that he was awfully shy, and he was a liar.

3.

Any talent has to have an agent. It took Harry three hours of meditation and a cup of Drambouie to locate Sebastian's. The Drambouie was a recent acquisition along with the big salary, the new apartment, and the custom built hi-fi which accompanied the meditation with muted jazz. The finer things seldom entered into the life of an ex-cop, ex-private investigator, and ex-usher, and Harry, who wanted to embrace all of life, wasn't too narrow to deny himself whatever pleasures he could afford. Hereditary memory called out for the essence of the Isle of Skye—it looked so elegant served in a small snifter alongside a cup of coffee. The problem then remained as to what to do with the coffee; but this was solved when the snifter was inadvertently broken in the sink thereby proving Harry's basic philosophy that everything will straighten itself out in time if he just had patience.

Three hours of mulling over why Margot was so interested in a third rate heel-thumper, and why Sebastian Granada was so inhospitable to backstage callers, and then Harry got around to asking himself who he would have for an agent if he were a Spanish dancer, and after that he turned off the hi-fi, went to bed, and slept until an hour of the morning sufficiently late for calling on one Gus Gomez, who handled most of the local Latin talent in the embryo stage, or until they had learned enough English to read their contracts.

Gomez had not wanted for frijoles for many a year. He was slightly under the weight of a young water buffalo and keenly appreciative of any potential employer for his surplus of entertainers. Did he have in his stable one Sebastian Granada? Gus answered in the affirmative, plus a vigorous nod, plus a fleeting but unmistakable expression of relief. Harry didn't miss the expression. He thought about it while Gus worked on the sale.

"This is a rare talent, MacKay." Gus pronounced the name correctly. Harry never knew why. "This isn't just another Spanish dancer. Sebastian Granada has dancing in his blood. His father, his grand-father, his great grand-father—all of them artists—yes, I said artists of the dance. And his repertoire! He knows all the traditional dances—"

"What's wrong with your boy?" Harry interrupted.

"—of Spain," Gus added, as if nothing had been

said. "He went out among the people—studied in all the provinces—lived in a cave in Andalusia—"

"I live in a cave in West Hollywood and I can't even Fox-trot," Harry said. "What's wrong with Sebastian, Gomez? Who scared him?"

That was putting it out where it couldn't be hidden. Gomez sighed and spread his pudgy hands palm down on his desk.

"All right, you saw him. You just told me—fear. Big fear—inside, you know?"

"Why?"

Gomez shrugged.

"Who knows? His father, his grand-father, his great-grand-father—courage like bullfighters. Sebastian—fear."

"Too much tradition," Harry suggested.

"Maybe so. Too much running, maybe. Too much war. Sebastian is twenty-six. A man experiences violence and goes on living; but a child experiences violence and stops growing. He dances like a god when he's not afraid; but when he's afraid, he's a child."

This was interesting. Sebastian was a real Spaniard, then. He wasn't just a dressed up wetback.

"How long have you handled him?" Harry asked.

"A year—no, ten months. Ten months ago he was brought to me. Fresh from the old country—something new. I put him in a rehearsal hall and got excited. I've got eyes, MacKay, and all that background—it shows. Of course he was scared—his first time in the States, what could I expect? I got him a few spots—one nighters. Not much money but a chance to work. They were small places. He was good. We were lucky. One night in a little place down on Pico there's a scout for a big new club opening in Diego. The scout liked Sebastian and bought him on the spot. Lucky! Less than two months I'd handled this boy and he's already a headliner. But I was nervous. A talent can go up too fast."

"So what happened?"

Gomez rolled his eyes ceilingward and shrugged again.

"Who knows? Rehearsals good—opening night he didn't even show."

"Vino?" MacKay asked.

Gomez shook his head.

"A woman?"

Again the shrug.

"Something must have happened in San Diego."

Gomez pushed back his chair.

"Something must have happened in San Diego! Something must have happened in Long Beach! Something must have happened in Santa Monica! Do you think it's easy to get an engagement for a dancer who runs out on the show? But I did. Twice more—good spots. Once he worked three nights before he disappeared. Once a week. Then he goes. A week or two later he's back wanting another job. Something was wrong. He can't explain. He can't speak enough English. Oh, the excuses! You should hear the excuses I get from these people!"

"But he's working now," Harry said.

Gomez smiled. He had beautiful and expensive dentures.

"There's a girl—Pepa. Her cousin owns the cafe. It's a job—it's steady, but it's a dead end."

It was a strange story. Coming from Gomez it was even more strange. He was telling the truth, and that was almost miraculous.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Harry asked.

The answer was even more surprising.

"Because you asked me—and because it doesn't matter what I tell you, because I know why you're here. Margot Lane sent you. She wants to take Sebastian under her wing. She'll rent him a studio, have costumes made, get an accompanist, set up a whole show around him if she has to buy out a club to do it. I know Margot Lane. She'll have a big thrill, and then she'll tire of him and Sebastian can go back to the club. One day, when he's too fat to dance any more, he can wait on tables and help out in the kitchen. You look surprised, MacKay. You think I've got gypsy blood, maybe? Well, there's no mystery. No mystery at all. Last night you were seen at the cafe with Margot Lane. Two—three weeks ago she came here to this office and asked to look through my files. She saw the photographs of Sebastian and asked where he could be seen. You see, simple—no mystery at all."

Gomez was happy, and MacKay didn't blame him. He knew how Margot operated. He would get more out of Sebastian this way then he had any reason to expect, and then, if Sebastian ran true to form and failed again, he would get rid of an unsalable article and be relieved. Gomez had everything figured out; but he was mistaken about one thing. There was a mystery.

4.

Gomez's prediction came true. To Harry MacKay all Spanish dancers were the same; to see one was to see all. But Sebastian hadn't been installed in his own studio very long before Harry began to notice a difference. The most obvious difference was in Sebastian himself. A timid soul who hid behind doorways began to blossom out in all the glory of his Spanish ego. It might have been because he felt the protection of a wealthy patroness; but as soon as Gomez lured him out of the cafe and he met and talked with Margot, Sebastian's timidity disappeared. Not that she encouraged him. She was very much the calculating business-woman—Sebastian might have been stuffed with sawdust; but this seemed only to add to her charm. The thing that happened to Sebastian wasn't love—it was

more like the attitude of a worshiper before an image of the virgin. The attitude—and a twisted smile he tried to conceal—occurred to Harry one day in the midst of a costume consultation. By this time Sebastian had proved himself to Margot's satisfaction and—giving a slight variation to Gomez's prediction—she was setting up a huge benefit show at which he was to be the surprise feature. Such a show would bring out the local brass and press. It could make Sebastian a star overnight—if he didn't disappear before curtain time. It was slightly less expensive than launching a battleship; but it was Larchmont's money and Harry was in favor of sharing the wealth.

As for the costumes, it was Margot's judgment that prevailed—artfully channeled through Sebastian's vocal chords. They were a study to watch—Sebastian no taller than Margot, slighter of bone and body, but masculine. So masculine Harry was envious. The eyes of every woman in the studio followed Sebastian, and most particularly the eyes of the very young and naively voluptuous brunette who was Pepa. A courtier to Margot, Sebastian developed an attitude of arrogance toward Pepa. It was natural enough. He was sure of her. She'd taken him in once and she'd do it again whenever he needed her. In the meantime, he'd shout at her, curse her, probably beat her when no one was about, because he was as high strung as a thoroughbred and had no Victorian tradition to curb his instincts. And after all, Pepa was just a peasant who adored him.

But even peasants have eyes. The better Sebastian performed for his sponsor, the more Pepa glowered and sulked. Margot was amused.

"I don't think Sebastian's little friend likes me," she remarked to Harry after the costume bit had been concluded to her glowing satisfaction.

"Maybe she has a reason," Harry answered.

"You still suspect my motives, don't you, Mr. MacKay."

"It's an occupational disease, Mrs. Larchmont. And now that I've been such an obedient errand boy all this time, I think I've a right to ask why you didn't tell me you'd been to Sebastian's agent the night I found you in the cafe. It would have saved me the trouble of looking for him."

Margot laughed. She was shining these days. This might be all she wanted of Sebastian after all—a thrill, a few weeks of glory before she tired of her toy.

"And why should I be interested in saving you trouble?" she asked. "I told you in the beginning, I wanted to see if you're worth your salary."

"Nobody's worth my salary," Harry said, "but that's beside the point. What puzzles me is an element of procedure. Did you go to Gomez looking for a dancer—or looking for Sebastian?"

For an instant the glow dimmed, as if there had been a sudden shortage on the power line; but Margot recovered quickly.

"Both, Mr. MacKay. I went to Gomez because I was looking for talent—genuine talent. Shall I be honest with you? I can be honest, you know—even with myself. I've never had it—not the real thing. I had guts and luck, but I never had the spark. Now I have wealth and position and time on my hands, and I can afford to look for the genuine."

A star sapphire the size of a robin's egg glittered on Margot's hand—genuine. The sable scarf tossed so casually about her shoulders—genuine. Everything about Margot was genuine—but was Margot? Harry listened, but he wasn't convinced. He was always skeptical of anyone who began a statement with a declaration of honesty. Honest people usually weren't aware of it.

"I liked Sebastian's face," she added. "I liked his body poses—his balance. I liked his background—and so I went after him. And you can get your eyebrow back into line, Mr. MacKay. You're mistaken in what you're thinking, and so is Pepa. To that child Sebastian is a man; to me he's a dancer and only a dancer."

It was a definite statement; but Harry still wasn't getting paid for taking anything on faith. Anyone who liked Sebastian's background—immediate—for investment purposes was just looking for a fast income tax write-off. He simply didn't believe her. And then something happened that gave him the first lead. One of those simple, innocent occurrences that have no bearing on anything else, but suddenly bring something into such sharp focus that the mind starts berating itself for not having seen the obvious sooner.

One afternoon a fireman dropped by the studio on a routine safety inspection. Just a man in a uniform, but at the sight of him Sebastian lost his beat, his poise, balance, and temper in consecutive order. The day was ruined. He erupted a stream of pure Castilian that was purple even to Harry's untutored ears, and went off to sulk in his dressing room.

It was a day when Margot wasn't about, and Pepa, who'd wrangled a promise of dinner from her part-time lover was scheduled for a lonely enchilada. It was Harry's chance to play big brother, and the role wasn't easy once he had Pepa opposite him in a narrow booth with just enough lighting to enchance her well-rounded charms. She was so innocent about it all—as if every little girl had exactly what she had in exactly the same arrangement.

For a while Harry could do nothing but ponder the lunacy of a man who would waste time pounding his heels in a hardwood floor when he could be relaxing with something so much softer; and then he remembered what was supposed to be on his mind and veered the conversation toward Pepa's favorite topic—Sebastian. Where had she met him?

How long had she known him? When had he left Spain? She was close enough to tears after the recent tirade to forget herself and become confidential with the first sympathetic companion to come along in some time. She talked. They had a bottle of wine and she talked more. They had a second bottle of wine, and before it was empty Harry had learned the truth of what he'd suspected the moment Sebastian shied at the sight of a uniform.

"But I tell you too much," Pepa said. "I shouldn't."

Harry ordered another bottle of wine.

"Of course you should," he said. "I'm your friend."

"How do I know that?"

"Because I tell you."

Harry reached across the table and took one of her hands in both of his. Sometimes he liked his job even when he couldn't remember the salary.

"So that's why Sebastian blew all those jobs. He entered the country illegally and is afraid of being deported."

She nodded gravely.

"It's not easy to come from Spain to the United States—the quota and this Franco. I have many friends—many relatives who come the way Sebastian came; but nobody notices them. They are laborers; it makes little difference. But Sebastian is a dancer. He appears before many people. If he is recognized—"

"But he'll appear before many people at the benefit."

Pepa's eyes were coffee-black, and they were troubled.

"I tell him that, but he says not to worry. Everything is all right now."

"Why is everything all right?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because the little man doesn't come around where he dances any more. Sebastian paid him money. He was to fix everything."

"A little man? Do you know his name?"

She shook her head.

"I saw him only once or twice. He used to call on the telephone after Sebastian went to work at my cousin's place; but he doesn't call any more."

"How long since he called?"

"How long?"

When she frowned it was like a school-child trying to remember a sum. Innocent. It took a lot of civilizing to spoil people with guilt and fear. Harry had to make an effort to concentrate on her answer.

"Since before Mrs. Larchmont came to the cafe," she said. "Two—three weeks before, I think. But it isn't important, is it? Sebastian says there's nothing to fear."

And Sebastian was god. Harry didn't have the heart to tell her otherwise.

"Forget I asked about it," he said. "Now finish your dinner and I'll take you home. I have to go home myself, I have to meditate."

5.

Drambouie—golden amber in the cup, and a very thin combo straining one more sob out of an old blues number. Harry relaxed and meditated. He pointed his imagination like the nose of the Lincoln and drove it as far as it would go in one direction; and then backed around and took another road. For a while he had trouble keeping his eyes on the road because Pepa was riding beside him; and then he tried riding with Margot and that was even worse. He kept waiting for the knife to slide between his ribs.

"You are prejudiced, Harry MacKay," he said aloud. "Those old movies were never that bad."

Then he tried to drive with Sebastian and a little man who used to come around and was going to fix everything. But little men who came around never fixed anything—even in Spanish Sebastian should understand that. But Sebastian wasn't afraid anymore. There must be a reason. Two—three weeks, Pepa had said. Three weeks prior to Margot's sudden interest in Terpsichorean art. Three weeks. A memory began to stir. Harry got up off the back of his neck, finished the Drambouie, turned off the hi-fi and got his hat. That was the danger of meditation; sooner or later it led to exercise.

Harry always kept in touch with the police—even on such a plush job as the one he now had. Cafe society drew both the cream and the crud; and he never knew when he might be rubbing shoulders with a celebrity whose publicity notices were kept on file at headquarters. This time the subject of inquiry was a little man who, Harry's meditation reminded him, had dabbled in ventures ranging from blackmail to selling tid-bits to the scandal magazines.

His name had been Charlie Pal—had been because on a night approximately three weeks prior to Harry's first glimpse of Sebastian this dabbling had ended abruptly when he carelessly stood in front of a bullet traveling at a lethal rate of speed across his own living room. Charlie, not being a curvacious blonde, rated only a small notice in the press at the time; and it was no surprise to Harry to learn that his killer was still at large. But there was an angle.

"There's a gentleman of whom you may have heard," Lieutenant Sommers explained, "who passes by the name of Mr. Angura and classifies himself for tax purposes as an importer."

"What does he import?" Harry asked, as if he didn't know.

"What do little junkies cry for?" Sommers answered. "But Angura's not our man. He's too big; he's for the federals. However, he has a trigger man named Malta—strictly a hood. Malta shot

Charlie Pal."

Sommers sounded positive, and he was a careful man. In the old days, Harry had worked with him enough to know that.

"You must have a reason for saying that," he said.

"I'd gamble my retirement on it. Malta was careless. He was seen leaving the building—one of those new ones spread around a swimming pool out on Crescent Heights. It was late at night, but one of the tenants doesn't like the way his garbage disposal works and takes it out on the manager by going swimming every night at midnight. He heard the shot—Charlie lived on a second level—and saw a man run down the stairs facing the pool. Ran right past the pool without seeing him. He's made a positive identification."

"But Malta had an alibi."

"Naturally—iron clad. But we could still nail him if we could locate the other man."

"There were two of them?"

"One of the other tenants, a lady who owns a Siamese cat with bad habits, was letting pussy in through the back door when she heard the shot. Seconds later, she tells us, a man ran down the back stairs and fled down the driveway. At least, she thinks it was a man. He wore pants, she said, but he was as small as a woman. She didn't get a front view."

MacKay meditated again. Something was beginning to fit into place. Sebastian was a small man.

"This Charlie Pal," he said, "had he been known to work the refugee trade? The vulnerable frighten easy."

Sommers nodded.

"Charlie's kind have no conscience, MacKay. Anybody who can scrape up a dollar is fair game. We thought of that angle, too. Sometimes a man such as Charlie frightens an already frightened individual just once too often and something snaps—but I don't buy it. I still like Malta. We have information that Pal had done a special job for Angura—a forged passport deal, and Angura never leaves loose ends dangling. This could be a very big thing—that's why we haven't let the press play it up. Someday somebody is going to slap cuffs on Angura and people will get hurt on an international scale. In the meantime, I'd settle for a confidential chat with Malta's accomplice."

"He might not have been an accomplice," Harry said.

"Do you know something?"

Harry didn't want to stick his neck out. His job was to protect Margot—and his salary—not wipe the noses of police lieutenant's.

"Not a thing," he said. "I just have a lot of spare time on my hands these days. I'm thinking of writing a detective story. But if I learn anything, I'll let you know."

Sommers just looked at him, still a careful man.

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," he said. "You look too prosperous, Harry. Watch yourself. You might want to come back on the force someday."

Harry grinned.

"What for—the retirement fund?"

"It has its advantages."

"I know. So does life insurance, but you have to be dead to collect. I don't mind dying, Sommers, but I want it to happen all at once. A lifetime takes too long."

With the discussion of philosophy over, Harry went back to the job he was being paid to do.

6.

It was three days before the next break. After his outburst, Sebastian pulled himself together and got back into stride. He didn't have much time. The publicity had gone out on Margot's big ball. She'd found some charity everyone else had overlooked to use as a beneficiary, managed a cut-rate deal on one of the better ballrooms in one of the better hotels, and garnered a lot of free press notices. Margot liked to spend money, but she also liked to drive a bargain.

She was still happy, and she still hadn't made a move to be anything more to Sebastian than a well-heeled sponsor, although she would have had only to crook her little finger to have him at her feet. This was no longer the problem that troubled Harry. As guardian of the body and public morals of Wayne Larchmont's bride, he was under a slight obligation to see that she didn't get caught in the publicity cross-fire of a sudden move by the police, the immigration department, the F.B.I., and possibly a branch or two of the United Nations. Sebastian was no longer afraid of a blackmailer. The blackmailer was dead. A man who might have been Sebastian was seen running down the back stairs immediately after the shooting. A suspicious mind could make a great deal out of that set of facts, and Harry MacKay trusted nobody.

And so he watched and waited and on the third day found a spot. It was after dress rehearsal. Sebastian had acquired half a dozen additional dancers and formed a full show. It was a colorful contingent that gave forth with much heel-thumping, guitar strumming, and random vocalizing. Harry would have preferred a lively can-can or even one thoughtful stripper; but this was Margot's extravaganza and she was satisfied. Sebastian wasn't. Everything was wrong. The guitarist played too slow; the girls danced too fast; the boys were clumsy as bulls. Sebastian's nerves were at the snapping point when Margot suggested a cocktail at the hotel bar just outside the ballroom—just Margot, Sebastian, the ever-watching Pepa, and, because she couldn't get rid of him even though

she tried, Harry. The atmosphere quieted a bit then.

"Mr. MacKay," Margot began. He no longer took notice of the deliberate mispronunciation. It was meant to keep the hired help in its place. "— what do you think of my judgment of talent now? What do you think of my discovery?"

All Spanish dancers still looked alike to Harry. He knew what he was going to do now that he had Sebastian cornered; but he stalled for time.

"I'm afraid I'm not a qualified critic, Mrs. Larchmont."

"No? Your modesty surprises me, Mr. MacKay. You're not a qualified prognosticator either, are you?"

This was a private insult. Margot was getting even for Harry's insolence that night at the cafe. He didn't answer and so she ordered another round of drinks. She was drinking vodka martinis this trip. The bourbon was for nocturnal variations.

Harry looked at Pepa and gave her what he could find of a smile. She didn't understand a word of what had been said. Sebastian wasn't even listening.

"You look tired, Pepa," he said. "You must be doing Sebastian's worrying."

Sebastian heard that.

"Worry?" he repeated. "Why worry?"

"Then you're not worried? Everything's under control?"

Sebastian hesitated. He glanced at Pepa. She said something to him in Spanish, and he flashed a dazzling smile.

"Si—control," he said. "Everything."

"Not like San Diego? Not like Long Beach or Santa Monica?"

Everybody observed a few seconds of silence. Harry could almost hear Margot's martini splashing against the olive. He caught the quick hurt in Pepa's eyes and wished she wasn't sitting in; but it was too late to stop now.

"I shouldn't have said that," he added, "but I'm afraid this is one of my nasty days. The trouble with being an ex-policeman is that sometimes the boys in the department forget that I am "ex" and act as if I were still working for the city. I'm tired of being quizzed everytime some minor hood gets himself murdered. Charley Pal! What do I know about Charlie Pal?"

Harry kept his eyes on Sebastian's face as he talked. He wanted to see the blood drain away and the fear spring into his eyes. He pronounced the name distinctly two times, but it wasn't Sebastian who broke.

"Oh God! Look what I've done!"

Harry had to slide for the aisle to escape the flowing martini. He swung about quickly and looked at Margot. She still held the stem of the glass in her hand—right below where it had snapped off in her fingers; and even her most rapid recovery wasn't rapid enough to hide what she wanted to hide. Her face was as white as death.

7.

And so there was still a mystery. It went like this: once upon a time Harry MacKay became suspicious of Margot Lane's motives and went looking for trouble; and anyone who knew Margot didn't have to look far to find that commodity. Back in his apartment, Harry meditated. He didn't open the Drambouie, or turn on the hi-fi; he didn't even turn on the lights. He stood before a huge picture window looking down on the vari-colored lights of a city that didn't know how to stop growing and tried to fathom the full implication of what he'd uncovered. He didn't really want to understand. It was safer not to look for any more trouble. He'd spent thirty-five rugged years climbing this far up the hill. Nobody climbs that far just to cut the ground out from under himself.

But neither does anyone climb that far without an inborn curiosity to drive him on. Some things hadn't changed since Moses. It was still necessary to handle the serpent before it became wisdom. Harry went back to see Sommers again. He had three purposes to this mission. First, he wanted to know the condition of Charlie Pal's apartment when his body was found. Had it been ransacked? Was anything missing? The answer was yes and no. The apartment had been neat enough, except for what was left of Charlie; but it was too neat. A blackmailer had to have evidence to sell and clients to sell to; Charlie left no files in the apartment, and no indication of where they might be found.

"The killer got more than Charlie," Harry concluded.

Sommers agreed.

"Angura is thorough. His trigger man may be careless; but you can be sure that Angura knew where Charlie kept his material and how to get his hands on it before he gave the order for eliminating a possible informant. After all, Angura was on Charlie's list."

This made Angura the caretaker of Charlie's estate; it also led naturally to the second part of Harry's mission. What he needed next was the complete story on Charlie Pal—everything right back to his birth certificate. Oddly enough, it was the birth certificate that was the most interesting item. Charlie Pal hadn't been the product of a slum in Detroit, or Chicago, or Cleveland. He had started his non-essential existence in a small town in Harlan County, Kentucky, where they learn to play rough early or not at all.

The third problem on Harry's mind was even easier to meet. The notorious Mr. Angura was no recluse. His address was that of one of the astro-

nomically priced apartment hotels just a ten minute drive from Harry's place. Harry knew it well. Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Larchmont lived in the penthouse.

"How's the detective story coming?" Sommers asked.

"I'm thinking of giving it up," Harry said.

But he couldn't give it up. There was no time left for getting involved with ancient histories. Records and case files were no good now. It was only a matter of days until Sebastian's debut, and the something that had seemed wrong with it in the beginning was now beginning to have a pungent but unidentifiable odor. Harry headed the Lincoln west with the possibilities racing through his mind.

He could remember certain things clearly now. He remembered a plane trip he'd made to San Francisco because he remained aboard too long waiting for a passenger who didn't show. Coincidences were running strong. The night of the flight just happened to be the night Charlie Pal died. Meditation was inadequate for such a situation. Harry was back on the beat again—not for the citizen's in their eternal struggle with themselves; but for Harry MacKay whose continued prosperity depended on Margot's ability to roast marshmallows over an erupting volcano and not get hurt.

Harry rarely went to the penthouse. This was Larchmont's domain; here he did his own bodyguarding. But Larchmont had flown off to Bombay, or Brussels, or Boston—Harry was never good at names—and wouldn't return until after Margot's big benefit, which only proved what a smart man he was. Harry took the elevator up, trying to convince himself that by friendly persuasion he could break the ice-pack and learn the truth about what Margot was hiding behind Sebastian's castinets. It was a new ultra-modern multiple unit that made even Harry's place resemble something sold knocked down in a surplus store. The penthouse covered the entire top floor; the lower floors had two apartments each separated by a wide center hall and soundproof walls. The Cabots spoke only to the Lodges, and the Lodges spoke only to God; but the residents of this building didn't speak to anybody. Even the automatic elevator was silent.

In the white vestibule on the penthouse level Harry pushed a white button on a white door and waited for a response. He waited a long time. Something was wrong. Margot's Cadillac was in the underground garage—he'd checked on that before coming up. He tried the door and found it locked; but what neither Margot nor Larchmont knew was that he had acquired a pass key shortly after taking on Margot as his life's work. He'd never had occasion to use it before; but never before had he reason to think Margot was keeping such dangerous company.

Inside, the stark white was muted by cove lighting, but not so muted but what he could see his way through the emptiness. One white room led into another, but no sign of Margot. The last door he reached stood ajar, a wedge of light cutting across the white rug. It was the door to a service stairway leading in the only direction it could lead—down. He followed the stairway. On the floor below he found what hadn't extended as far as the penthouse level—a service elevator. The floor indicator was stopped at the sixth floor. He watched it for a good five minutes, then returned to the penthouse, took the main elevator down to the manager's office and got him away from a late movie on television. It was worth the effort. He learned that one of the apartments on the sixth floor was unoccupied; the other belonged to a certain Mr. Angura.

After an appropriate interval, Harry returned to the penthouse. He pushed the white button on the white door, and this time it opened.

"I should have telephoned," Harry said. "You might have been out."

Margot's face was flushed. She wore a mink coat loosely about her shoulders. She seemed to become aware of it as he stood staring at her.

"I was reading," she said. "I got chilly."

"I thought these places had unit heat."

Margot glared at him.

"Is there a reason for this intrusion, Mr. MacKay? If not, I think I'll go to bed. It's been a tiring day."

"I noticed that, too," Harry said. "Maybe it's old age catching up with us—the burden of past sins." He'd come prepared for a chilly reception. Out of his coat pocket he pulled a folded sheet of paper. "It's not too important, but I was passing by and the printer likes to get paid. It's for the engraved invitations—"

She snatched the bill from his hand and went across the room to a white writing desk. She didn't bother to sit down while she wrote the check. If she had, she would have been eye-level with a handsome portrait of Wayne Larchmont who watched her from a silver frame.

Harry came into the room to take the check from her hand. He wasn't invited to sit down.

"I guess that takes care of everything," Harry said. "The show can go on now—if Sebastian doesn't run out on you."

"He won't," Margot said.

"He's run out on every big chance he's had before."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. MacKay."

"Are you aware of the reason? He's in this country illegally. He's liable to deportation if he's recognized."

Something—a flicker of something Harry was too young to understand lighted Margot's eyes for just an instant.

"I know all of that," she said. "Sebastian told

me before we began our relationship. I told him that he had no reason to worry about that any longer. These things can be arranged."

Margot's hand—the one with the robin's egg sapphire—rested on the silver frame of Larchmont's photo. The gesture was unconscious, but revealing.

Harry tried once more.

"Sebastian used to pay blackmail to a certain Charlie Pal. Charlie's dead now."

"I know that, too," Margot said. "You told me. Is there anything else, Mr. MacKay?"

There was nothing else. If Harry had stayed any longer, he would have needed a coat, too.

8.

Margot had visited Angura's apartment. Harry knew that as well as he knew how to pronounce his own name. And why? Charlie Pal had been shot the night she didn't take the plane to San Francisco. There had to be a connection. But Sommers had an eye-witness who had identified Malta as the killer, and nobody could be mistaken about Malta. Harry had checked the mug book. Malta was a huge man with beetle-black eyebrows, a lantern jaw, and a nose that looked as if it had been run over by a large truck. The possibility of such a face belonging to more than one man was remote—besides, Charlie had made the mistake of doing business with Angura. That thought gave Harry a bad jolt. Margot was doing the same thing.

But exactly what the nature of that business was, he wasn't to learn until the night Sebastian died.

Margot's name was still strong enough to command a turn-out to her benefit—especially now that it was fortified with Larchmont's. The affair was a sell-out, and Margot was a sensation. Her gown had probably cost more than the entire show, and the liquidation value of the jewelry she wore would have meant retirement for any first-class thief. But Margot, Margot's jewelry, and Margot's gilt-edged friends ceased to interest Harry at the moment he caught sight of the guest of honor. Nobody announced him as such—nobody so much as spoke to him; but at the sight of his huge, awkward presence made its way through polite society, Harry got the message with all the subtlety of a blackjack on the back of the head. A dinner jacket and a black tie couldn't make a gentleman out of a hood, and nothing could be done with that face. Malta. It was Malta, as big as death.

And that, Harry knew, was exactly what he was.

For a few minutes he couldn't move. He was too fascinated with the pantomime. Malta moved slowly and deliberately. The tables fanned out horseshoe fashion from the stage. In the very first row he paused and looked about him. Margot, as inconspicuous as a spotlight stood amid friends across the room. She saw him. An almost imperceptible nod, and Mr. Malta sat down. Margot turned her head, never missing a word of her conversation, but at that instant she saw Harry watching her. At that instant she did miss a word, but only a word. Margot was still an actress.

Harry was sweating by the time he reached the door of Sebastian's dressing room. Pepa stood in front of it like a guardian angel.

"Sebastian sees no one now," she protested. "He is very nervous—"

"But not nervous enough," Harry said. "Remind me to apologize for shoving, honey, but I've no time for explanations."

He burst into the room, shutting Pepa in the hall behind him. Sebastian, all dressed up in one of those fine costumes Margot had chosen for him —he would make a beautiful corpse—spun away from the mirror and glared at him.

"Pepa!"

Harry stood against the door. He didn't want her to hear this.

"Relax," he said. "You're not going on."

At first he was afraid he'd need Pepa after all. Sebastian didn't seem to understand. Outside, the music was starting. Sebastian didn't want to wait.

"Never mind the music," Harry said. "We have to talk. Charlie Pal—do you know the name? Yes or no."

"Si, I know," Sebastian said.

"He blackmailed you, didn't he? He told you that you would be deported unless you paid him money?"

Fear came to Sebastian's eyes.

"That's all over! Margot said—"

"I know what Margot said. And stop listening for your cue. If you go out on that stage tonight you'll be as dead as Charlie Pal—and you know how dead that is, don't you? You were there when it happened."

"No—!"

"You went to pay Charlie money again. You saw it happen."

"I did not kill him, Senor! I swear—"

"But you saw who did kill him—didn't you? A big man. A big, ugly man with heavy eyebrows and a crooked nose—and he saw you. Yes, that's it! He saw you—"

Harry was talking to himself. The picture had started to come into focus when he spotted Malta out in front; but now the figures began to move. Three figures. There had to be three figures—

Sebastian was still impaled by fear. He hadn't moved.

"Three figures," Harry said aloud. "Sebastian, did you see anything else? Were you in the apartment?"

"No—no! I did not go in. I went to pay Senor Pal money, like you say; but I got only to the door. I raised my hand to knock and there is a

shot. The door opens—this man with the ugly face runs out. He has a gun in his hand. He pushed me so I almost fall down and when I can see into the room again, I see Senor Pal on the floor and I see the blood. Then I run too—but I didn't kill him! I swear that—"

What Sebastian swore didn't matter. There still had to be another figure somewhere, seeing but unseen. A third figure who saw both Malta and Sebastian.

Harry stared at Sebastian. It was more than his costume; it was the way he stood, his hands, his feet, his generations of breeding for the one thing he was to do. He was a dancer. A professional would have seen that. A professional would have known where to look in order to find him when he was needed, and as soon as Angura discovered whose name was on Charlie's blackmail list, he would be needed bad.

The music had stopped. In a moment the guitar would give Sebastian's cue.

"Sebastian," Harry said, "You've got to listen to me now, and you've got to understand. You can't go out there. The man who killed Pal is a dangerous man. He knows he was seen at that apartment. He can identify you—and that's why he's here. Yes, out in front right now. You're not giving a performance tonight, Sebastian. You're going out to star in the most expensive line-up ever staged. Set foot on that stage and your as good as dead."

Sebastian moved. He moistened his lips.

"He is out there?"

"Look for yourself if you don't believe me. Better yet, ask Margot—she invited him. While you're at it, ask her if she knew Charlie Pal. They were born in the same town—population 230. Ask her what he had on her important enough to use you for ransom to get it back."

Sebastian listened. Some things were the same in any language. He had believed what he wanted to believe; but only in fairy tales do fairy queens appear—even in Spain.

The guitar was playing.

"Margot—" he said.

"Forget Margot. Pepa's waiting outside. You can get away without Malta seeing you."

"And then, Senor?"

Sebastian looked at him with a strange expression—almost a smile on his face.

"And then I can run," he said. "This ugly man—this killer, he knows who I am now. He will find me. If he doesn't, the police will find me and I am deported. Do you know what it is for Sebastian Granada to be deported? When I was a little boy I saw my father dance in the greatest theatre in Madrid. Then the war came. The next time I see him dance it is from the end of a rope. After that all my life is running and hiding. I am tired of running, Senor."

Sebastian turned back to the mirror. The guitar was impatient now. He placed a stiff-brimmed hat on his head and straightened his jacket.

"I am already a dead man," he said. "I run no more."

9.

Sebastian Granada was a dead man when he stepped onto the stage, and Harry hated funerals. He went out to the bar. He expected to be alone, but Margot was waiting for him. She was hanging onto a bourbon that hadn't been touched.

"Why didn't you stop him?" she asked.

"You can't stop a Spaniard," Harry said. "Besides, he loved you."

"Love! I know that kind of love!"

"Every man loves a goddess," Harry reminded.

"And every woman loves a man—if she can find one. I have, MacKay. Do you understand me? I have, after all these years! That's the joker that makes you so superfluous. I happen to be in love with my husband."

"But you saw Malta shoot Charlie Pal."

"Charlie! He was no danger to me. He was like a personal charity, poor little man. But Angura! Two days after Charlie was shot, he called me. He wanted to use me to get the benefit of Wayne's influence. But I was ready for him. I'd seen Sebastian one night in a little place on the beach. I recognized him that night at Charlie's."

"And made a deal," Harry said. "You're freedom for Sebastian's life."

"My husband's career for the life of a useless parasite!"

"I thought he was genuine talent."

"Genuine! That phoney Spaniard! He's probably some wet-back peon who would have ended up picking carrots if I hadn't given him one night of glory. Listen, they're not even applauding the poor fool!"

They weren't applauding. The music had stopped, but there was no sound from the ballroom. And then it started. The applause, the cheers, the weeping—the ovation that would send the critics to their dictionaries looking for adjectives to describe Sebastian's one night of life. Margot—who never knew the value of anything until she read the price tag—had overlooked one thing.

Gomez was right. Sebastian danced like a god when he wasn't afraid; and a dead man has no fear.

It was all over, and he was glad of it. Because her father would kill them both if he knew. . . .

GOODBYE, CHARLIE

by

BOB PRICHARD

He lay here with her now on the sleeping bag in the top story of the deserted mill, hearing her breathe rhythmically at his side, asleep and content. He smiled to himself, glad he had made her happy yet knowing that if he kept it up, she would want to get married. Then there *would* be one helluva ruckus. He had no intention of marrying her, now or ever, but like all women she thought she could make the decision, then force it.

He heard a creaking sound at the base of the stairs and sat bolt upright. Beth stirred beside him and he reached over and clamped his hand gently over her mouth. She became rigid beside him. His first thought was of her father, Tom Glasgow.

Then he realized that the thought was stupid because old man Glasgow had no idea they were out together. And the last place he would think to look for them was this old deserted mill that had been abandoned years before. Besides, they hadn't come straight here. They had stopped off at *The Oasis Club* first to have a few drinks. Then they had come out here to finish what they had started.

The stairs creaked again and Charlie Pounds knew that someone was trying to sneak up on them. He leaned over quickly and whispered, "Stay where you are and be quiet."

He slipped noiselessly off the bag, glad he had

taken off his shoes, and padded over to the doorway. It couldn't be a night watchman because they would have run into him before. And the only person at *The Oasis* who knew them was Jake, the boy who worked with him at Allbright's Hardware, and Jake had been quietly getting drunk at the bar.

As the tall man came through the doorway, his figure was faintly outlined in the moonlight and Charlie saw it was Jake. He was vastly relieved, although he thought it odd that Jake would follow them.

He started to speak but Jake snapped on a flashlight. The beam caught Beth sitting there, her eyes big and her hands clutching her dress in front of her.

"Jake?" she gasped.

"Yes, it's me, you bitch," Jake replied. "Where is he?"

"Here I am, Jake," Charlie said.

The beam of the flashlight turned swiftly, then went to the broken ceiling and started down. Charlie stepped in and grabbed the hand that was trying to club him and he found it strong and determined. "Jake!" he exclaimed. "You're drunk! You don't know what you're doing!"

Jake cursed him and tried hard to break the grip. Then Charlie felt a hard fist grind into the side of his face and he staggered back, pulling the flashlight with him.

He turned it on Jake's face and saw the dilated nostrils, the stark expression, and heard the heavy breathing. "Are you crazy, Jake?" he asked excitedly. "It's me, Charlie!"

"Don't let him get to me, Charlie," Beth exclaimed.

Jake licked his lips and blinked. His eyes were bloodshot but he was steady on his feet. "I'll get you later," he called out to her.

Jake swung a wide one and it caught the flashlight, sending it clattering to the wooden floor. It went out. Charlie felt two strong hands go around his neck, gradually forcing his neck back. When his breath started whistling through his teeth, he swung his body sideward and let go a hard one, feeling his fist go deep. Charlie pulled back and hit him again, yelling, "you damn fool, stop it!"

Two strong arms went around his back in a bearlike hug and Charlie brought up his knee sharply and gave him a good one. Now he knew it was a fight till one of them dropped.

Jake groaned and leaned forward, trying to hold on. Charlie let him have the knee again. Jake gasped and turned loose. Charlie moved in, slugging hard and working on the belly, then the face, trying to keep him from getting set. Then Charlie pushed him.

Jake let out a cry, fumbled in the darkness for something that wasn't there, then stumbled backward, bounding heavily against the stairs, rolling, tumbling and cursing as he went down.

Charlie listened for a moment but there was no sound. He went back into the room and fumbled around till he found the flashlight. He flicked it off and on but the glass was gone and the bulb was smashed. Beth touched him lightly and he jumped.

"Put your things on," he said. "We're getting the hell out of here. And bring my shoes with you."

He went down the stairs slowly with his cigarette lighter in his hand. Halfway down he snapped it lit and almost stepped on Jake. He was lying almost at the bottom of the stairs, his knees almost touching his chin.

Charlie bent over him warily, the lighter heating up in his hands. He saw tears running out of Jake's eyes. Jake kicked at him with one leg and mumbled, "Get away from me, you bastard."

Charlie stood there dumbfounded and Beth came down behind him. "Serves him right," she said. "I'm glad you gave it to him. He's been pestering me for over a month now."

Then Charlie knew, and felt sick.

They rode in silence down the birch-lined road, catching the sweet smell of Autumn as it came through the windows. Charlie's hands were clenched tightly around the steering wheel and he stared straight ahead, seeing her only out of the corner of his eye. Each time she cautiously moved her leg over, he thrust it back with his knee, not wanting to touch her; not now or ever again.

"I don't see why you hate me," she said. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"I hate myself more than you, Beth," he said. "And I hate what happened to Jake. How could he have got the idea that all he had to do was step in and take over?"

Beth straightened up and lighted a cigarette. "I really wasn't sure, till you started taking me out, which one of you I wanted," she said.

He was struck by the coarseness of her remark. "You haven't been out with him, have you?" he asked.

"Now don't get excited, Charlie," she said. "We didn't do a thing except have a few beers and tell some jokes. Remember those nights last month when you took inventory all alone?"

He remembered it, too well, how Jake had begged off, complaining of stomach trouble. And how he had taken inventory, three nights running, without him.

Then, when he realized what a fool Beth had made of herself, he started laughing. He soon was laughing so hard he had to stop the car and lean over the wheel.

"You should have stuck with Jake," he managed to gasp. "He probably would have married you. And I told you from the very start that all I wanted was a good time."

Beth threw away her cigarette. "I've given you everything you've wanted, anytime you've wanted it," she said slowly. "And if my dad knew it, he would kill us both. No, Charlie. You're not going to treat me like that."

He stopped laughing now. She was dead serious. "Better shake those imaginary wedding bells out of your head," he said, "because I'll guarantee you they'll never ring for us."

"But I love you, Charlie," she said, coming closer. "I've always loved you and I've given you everything."

"Yes," he said, "just like you gave everything to the guy before me, and just like you will give everything to the guy who comes behind."

Before he could grab her, she had raked her long nails down one side of his face and was starting on the other. He clamped down on her hands and shoved her away, feeling the hot blood course down. She raised up to try it again and he slapped her hard, into her corner of the car where she started crying.

"That finishes you and me, babe," he said. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll leave the sleeping bag in the mill so you can use it the next time."

"You won't get away with this, Charlie," she sobbed.

"Oh yes I will, Beth," he said. "I already have."

The town beneath them looked cold in its white lights and he took the curves down the grade slowly, remembering the accident he had almost had here the year before. Beth had lighted another cigarette and was looking out the window.

"Have you come to your senses?" he asked.

Her answer was prompt. "Yes, I can see you're right. There's no use in my lying. I knew how it was between us from the start."

Charlie felt a surge of relief. "It couldn't have been any other way, Beth. You know that. The only thing that hurts is Jake."

"Right again," she said. "I've been thinking about him all the way home. I wish I could do something to make up for what happened."

"You should have told me he was serious about you," Charlie said. "Maybe I could have fixed it up."

"It would have been better," she admitted. "At least I would have had a future with him."

"It's probably too late now," Charlie said.

"You know him better than I."

"I'll tell you what," he said, turning to her. "Where can we go to talk it over? Maybe we can figure out something, some explanation."

"My house is as good a place as any," she said. "Dad is having his weekly poker session downtown with some of the boys. He won't be home till late."

Charlie looked at his watch. Almost midnight. "How late?"

"Oh, two or three, and sometimes four," she said.

He drove along for several minutes, thinking it over. If he dropped her off at the cab stand, as usual, there would be too many people around and they wouldn't have a chance to talk. Someone would recognize them and if Glasgow found out . . .

"OK," he said. "But let's make it quick."

He drove slowly up the graveled drive, handling the car with ease. He was listening to the popping sound beneath the tires as the car moved forward, thinking how easy this was going to be.

As his car came slowly alongside the house he saw into the living room. A hulking man was reading by the light of the lamp. Looking past he saw Glasgow's car parked in the garage.

Charlie cursed bitterly and jammed down on the brakes, flinging the gear shift into reverse. When he pressed down on the accelerator, the engine died under him. He looked, and with horror saw that Beth had taken the keys out of the ignition and was holding them halfway through the open window.

A new and terrible panic seized him, a panic greater than any he had ever known before. He knew now that it wasn't going to be so easy after all. "Give me the keys!" he sobbed, reaching out for her arm.

She smiled in the half light. As his hand touched her arm she flung the keys out into the darkness. An instant later she was out the door, screaming as if her head were coming off. Her screams reached out across the darkness. As soon as one scream died away, she started another. The sounds cut through the still night air like a razor.

Charlie snapped open the glove compartment. He threw out matches, road maps, and junk in search of the extra key. His hands scrambled about feeling for that key. He had to have that key.

His finger touched it and began to bring it forward, and then it slid back from his sweaty hand. His fingers had it again and as he was bringing it out he saw her walk in front of the headlights. She looked at him with an expression of complete hatred and, with her head flung back, screamed again. Her scream reached down his back with cold fingers.

He was inserting the key into the ignition when his hand trembled suddenly, uncontrollably, and the key fell to the floorboard.

He reached down between his knees to the black bottom, running his hand to and fro. His fingers struck the key, knocking it under the front seat.

It was then that the dazzling light hit his eyes and he looked up. He was looking up into the flashlight on his side of the car. He saw, too, the barrel of the pistol alongside of it.

Glasgow said, "Why, you dirty, low punk! I told

you to keep your hands off my daughter!"

Charlie cringed as the barrel of the gun slid in closer.

It loomed large and heavy in front of his eyes. He yelled, "I didn't touch her, Mr. Glasgow! I swear I . . ."

Charlie heard the metallic click of the hammer being drawn back and he yelled again. "Help me, Beth! Explain to your Dad!"

Beth stood there in the headlights looking at him. Then she threw her head back and screamed louder than before, and more finally.

A mighty force knocked Charlie back against the seat. He lifted up, still trying to explain when the second shot sprawled him over the seat of the car.

He was trying to get it out that he hadn't been the first to take her, when the next two bullets blasted into the base of his skull.

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